THE JOHN SLIDELL MISSION: MEXICO 1845-1846

An abstract of a Thesis by
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The problem. Controversy has long existed regarding the diplomatic mission of John Slidell to Mexico in the period before the outbreak of the Mexican War. Sent by President James K. Polk, Slidell ostensibly had a dual purpose: to repair the damage to U.S.-Mexican relations created by the annexation of Texas, and to purchase a large portion of what is now Southwest U.S. from Mexico. Polk enjoyed an initial period of praise from historians for his actions in the matter. In the past few decades, however, a large number of historians have accused the American President of deliberately provoking a war with the nation's southern neighbor in order to obtain territorial concessions. This thesis examines the controversy and presents evidence to support its conclusions.

Procedure. The first step in the construction of the thesis involved a thorough review of secondary sources written since the time of the mission. After this primary sources were carefully consulted. A great deal of attention was paid to works of the principal participants themselves. Finally, correspondence between Slidell and Washington was examined and relied on heavily. Notes from these works were placed on cards and the paper was then written from these.

Findings. It is the conclusion of this writer that President Polk did not deliberately act about to provoke a war with Mexico. Rather it was his intention to sincerely seek a negotiated settlement. The terms proffered by the President, however, precluded the possibility of any such settlement. In addition, the internal situation in Mexico was such that the mission was for all practical purposes doomed to failure from its inception.

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Chapter 1

ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

When Mexico achieved its independence from Spain in 1821, the new government decided upon a continuation of the Spanish policy toward settlement on the plains of Texas. This policy encouraged Americans, such as Moses Austin and his son, Stephen, to move to the area and officially take up residence. The sparse population of this, their northernmost state, and their own inability and lack of desire to govern it undoubtedly were motivating factors in the decision. Soon, Americans, attracted by the availability of cheap, relatively productive land, outnumbered the natives by a wide margin. Most of these were hard-working families who desired a better life for themselves. Many others arrived in the territory one jump ahead of the law. For them, the outstanding quality of the region was its comparative lack of law enforcement. The Mexicans maintained the immigration policy until 1830 when they abruptly altered it to permit no Americans to move into the area.

For the first few years after Mexican independence, there was no attempt on the part of the United States to establish formal relations with its southern neighbor. Finally, in 1825, President John Quincy Adams initiated discussions which led to the appointment of Joel R. Poinsett as the first U.S. Minister to Mexico. This man was eminently

well-qualified and thoroughly prepared to begin the task of arranging amicable relations. Unfortunately circumstances intervened which prevented his success. An important part of his assignment was to establish with certainty the boundaries between the two countries. Secretary of State Henry Clay instructed him to do no less than reaffirm the boundary line fixed in the 1819 treaty with Spain. Also, if at all possible, he was to purchase a large portion of northern Mexico. For this he was authorized to pay the sum of one million dollars. Although there were several compelling reasons for Mexico to sell this region to the United States, she did not choose to do so. After two years of tedious negotiations, an agreement was signed on January 12, 1828, which did nothing other than reaffirm the 1819 treaty. In April of that year the U.S. Senate ratified it; however, the Mexican Congress failed to do likewise by the May 12 deadline. At this point, the Mexican government accused Poinsett of stealing the only copy of the treaty to prevent its ratification. This was done, according to the Mexican version, in order to satisfy American designs on Texas.[1]

As Andrew Jackson assumed the Presidency, he inherited this deteriorated state of relations between the two countries. Since the new President believed that his

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[1]Justin H. Smith, The War With Mexico, Volume 1 (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919), p. 60.

administration should cultivate harmonious relations with the nation's southern neighbor, he resumed negotiations. The new Secretary of State, Martin Van Buren, instructed Poinsett to offer up to five million dollars for the province of Texas. By the time discussions were to begin, Poinsett had become persona non grata in Mexico. He had proved to be a convenient scapegoat by which the ruling Federalist party covered many of their own indiscretions. Finally, late in 1829, the Mexican government requested that Poinsett be recalled, at which point Jackson chose a personal friend, Anthony Butler, as a successor. The President ordered Butler, as his first duty, to begin "promoting better feelings and securing more amiable relations between the two countries."[1] Although the United States desired above all to conclude the boundary question, the Mexicans indicated they would do nothing in this regard until commercial relations had been dealt with.[2] Accordingly, each country signed and ratified a treaty of amity and commerce in 1831. By the terms of this agreement, each side granted most-favored-nation status to the other, agreed to promote and regulate the growing Santa Fe trade, and promised to restrain Indians

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[1]Martin Van Buren to Anthony Butler, October 16, 1829, Manning, W. R., Ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States (hereafter DCUS), Inter-American Affairs 1831-1860, Vol. VIII, Mexico 1831-1848 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1937), pp. 8-17.

[2]Jesse S. Reeves, American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1907), p. 70.

frustration at each turn. Finally, in desperation, he even indicated his desire to attempt bribery in order to achieve the desired results.[1] President Jackson was quick to assert that "Nothing will be countenanced by the executive to bring this government under the remotest imputation of being engaged in corruption or bribery."[2] Shortly after this incident, the Mexican government requested that Butler be recalled, which was promptly done. An atmosphere of suspicion and distrust pervaded relations between the two countries.

This hostile atmosphere first manifested itself in the Mexican attitude toward Texas. Where once they had welcomed the presence of American settlers in the region, they now took steps to prevent any further immigration. In addition, they undertook a number of measures designed to tighten their tenuous hold on the northern province. These included the abolition of slavery, a move which would make the area less attractive for American settlers who relied on the institution; the imposition of a series of revenue measures calculated to work financial hardships on those already in Texas; and the encouragement of their own citizens to move into the area and hopefully outnumber the Americans.[3]

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[1]Butler to Livingston, June 17, 1835, ibid., p. 290.

[2]Andrew Jackson, postscript to Butler Letter, June 17, 1835, ibid., p. 293.

[3]Rippy, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

These steps reflected a very real fear on the part of the Mexican government that, due to American designs on Texas, they stood a real chance of losing that province.

These moves on the part of Mexico caused a serious reaction among Texans. They first sought sufficient representation in the Mexican Congress and, when this move proved unsuccessful, appealed for official separation from the State of Coahuila. This plea was also denied. There followed a number of minor rebellions, and finally, a declaration in 1833 that they were a self-governing member of the Mexican Confederation. The Mexican authorities did not recognize this step, but took no immediate action. In 1835, however, Mexican President Santa Anna proclaimed a unified constitution, raised a large army, and advanced northward ostensibly to force the Texans to submit. This action led to the long-awaited declaration of independence. The war which followed was of limited duration. The most decisive battle took place at San Jacinto, where Texas forces routed the Mexicans, capturing Santa Anna in the process. They forced him to sign a treaty by which Mexican troops were to leave and Texas independence was recognized. Although Santa Anna quickly disavowed the treaty upon his release, this action had no real effect for, by this time, Texas had achieved its independence.

Throughout this entire affair the Jackson administration pursued a neutral policy with the exception of a single

incident. General Gaines, commander of U.S. military forces in the Southwest, crossed the border between the two countries with a detachment of troops. Although he did this for the avowed purpose of quelling Indian raids, his action must be seen as an attempt to give "aid and comfort" to the Texans during the fight. In most other regards, the American government adhered to its announced policy. This was not true of private American citizens, however, for many of them either lent financial support to the Texans or actually fought in the struggle. Although what the citizens did was ". . . legal in most cases, unstoppable in others,"[1] the Mexicans remained unconvinced, preferring to believe that the United States government was heavily involved. For a time, Powhatan Ellis, who succeeded Butler as Mexican Minister, believed that the Mexicans might sever relations with the U.S. due to ". . . the supposed interference of the United States in the war of Texas."[2] Mexico did not take this extreme step, but hostility supplanted any vestige of cordiality which might have remained between the two countries. New American President Martin Van Buren did not improve matters in 1837 by granting official recognition to the Texas Republic.

Ill-feeling continued into the 1840's reaching a

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[1]Smith, op. cit., p. 63.

[2]Powhatan Ellis to John Forsyth, May 19, 1836, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 326-327.

flood-tide by the middle of the decade. Three separate yet interrelated situations combined with a number of frustrating minor incidents to produce a crisis out of which would emerge war. The first situation arose out of a series of claims on the Mexican government by citizens of the United States. These claims, which involved anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, grew out of disputes over commerical and trading rights. Added to these, nevertheless, were some serious breaches of national honor for which payment was sought. Nor was the United States alone in pursuing claims against the Mexicans. Both Great Britain and France were doing likewise, the latter becoming involved in the so-called "Pastry War" of 1838, in which French claims, backed by military strength, forced a settlement.

The United States first sought to collect on the claims in 1829 when Van Buren, then Secretary of State, wrote Butler that there were ". . . several claims on the part of citizens of the United States, against the government of Mexico . . . which remain unsatisfied. You are directed . . . to urge upon the former the justice and expediency of setting apart a portion of . . . money, as large as can be obtained, to satisfy such claims."[1] As was to be the case with later attempts, this effort proved unsuccessful. President Jackson was at

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[1]Martin Van Buren to Anthony Butler, October 17, 1829, DCUS, op. cit., p. 17.

first inclined to be lenient on the matter; as late as December, 1836, he recommended that the matter be pursued with "courtesy and forebearance." However, in the next few months the situation regarding Texas had so antagonized the two countries that in February, Jackson took the claims question before Congress. There he proposed that his next demand for settlement be made from the deck of a warship and requested authorization to undertake reprisals if Mexico continued her delaying tactics on the matter. He never carried out his threats.

On the other hand, Van Buren took decisive action on the matter soon after his inauguration. In a sharply-worded note to the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of State John Livingston stated:

> /I am writing/ for the purpose of inviting for the last time the serious attention of the government /of Mexico/ to the numerous . . . complaints of injuries to the citizens and insults to the officers, flag and government of the United States by Mexican authorities, and to make a solemn and final demand of satisfaction for them. . . . The unreasonable delay . . . and the apparent indisposition to take any effectual measures to prevent a recurrence of acts of the character complained of, have severely tried the forbearance of the United States /who/ may be justified in the eyes of all nations for any measures they shall be compelled to take. . . .[1]

The note was accompanied by a presentation of fifty-seven claims which had been authenticated. The tactic was

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[1]John Forsyth to Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, May 27, 1837, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 79-83.

apparently successful for the Mexican government admitted that certain of the claims should be paid and, after stalling for nearly a year, proposed arbitration as a means of solving the problem. The United States immediately accepted both this suggestion and the Mexican choice of Prussia as arbitrator. Finally, after two years of delaying tactics undertaken by the Mexicans, five commissioners were selected and deliberations by the body began in August, 1840. During the next eighteen months, the commission reviewed a large majority of the claims and, at the conclusion of that time, awarded United States citizens slightly over two million dollars. Mexico agreed to make payments for a five-year period of time in quarterly installments. In fact she made three payments and then abruptly quit, professing an inability to pay.[1] Although it was common knowledge that Mexico was in dire financial straits, this incident added to a growing U.S. exasperation with her southern neighbor.

Events surrounding the annexation of Texas did not diminish this exasperation. Soon after that republic achieved independence, it proposed annexation to the United States. This was quietly spurned by President Van Buren who argued that the existing treaties between Mexico and the U.S. precluded such action. After this rebuff, sentiment in Texas which had once been decidedly in favor of annexation,

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[1]Smith, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

cooled considerably. Mirabeau Lamar, an outspoken opponent of annexation who had been elected president of the Republic, proceeded to lead his countrymen on a path of independence. By 1840 Texas had been recognized as an independent republic by the United States, Holland, Belgium, France, and Great Britain, and had commercial ties to the latter two.[1]

The change of administrations which resulted in the Presidency of John Tyler did not immediately bring a change in the American stance regarding annexation. Although Tyler himself favored adding Texas to the Union, he hesitated to press the matter for a number of reasons. The issue had become closely identified with the raging slavery debate. Anti-slave forces viewed annexation as an attempt to spread the evil institution and could be expected to provide howls of protest against any such move. The pending negotiations with Great Britain over the Oregon boundary could possibly be jeopardized by annexation. Also, two key persons whose support would be needed, President Lamar of Texas, and Tyler's own Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, opposed the idea. Their opposition, while not absolutely final, would be crucial in an expected battle. The prospect of war with Mexico over the issue, although not something which caused great consternation, was a factor to be reckoned with. These considerations caused Tyler to delay any plans which he had for adding

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[1]Reeves, op. cit., p. 87.

Texas to the Union.

But a series of unrelated incidents caused Tyler to reconsider the annexation question in late 1843. For one thing, the Webster-Ashburton treaty suggested that Great Britain and the United States could resolve the Oregon issue peacefully. Secondly, Webster was no longer in office and the new Secretary, A. P. Upshur, favored annexation. Finally, Sam Houston, an advocate of union with the U.S., had once again become president of Texas. He had pursued a policy of carefully courting foreign powers in hopes that his northern neighbor would view such proceedings with a jaundiced eye and proceed at once with the union. These factors prompted Tyler to order Upshur to take up the question with the Texas representative in Washington, Issac Van Zandt. Because Upshur was not able to give assurances that the Senate would ratify a treaty, negotiations initially proceeded slowly. Finally, Upshur ascertained that the required two-thirds majority could be obtained and communicated this information to Houston who immediately dispatched a group of commissioners to Washington to negotiate a treaty. While these talks were proceeding, Upshur was killed in an accident and replaced by John C. Calhoun. This proved no barrier to the proceedings, and a treaty was brought forth in April, 1844. By the time the Senate received it, however, the two-thirds majority foreseen by Upshur had evaporated and the treaty was

rejected.[1]

Once he became convinced the treaty could not be ratified in the Senate, Tyler turned to another plan. Believing that haste was necessary to forestall British maneuvers, and probably desiring to obtain the honor of bringing Texas into the Union, he hit upon a plan which would allow both houses of Congress to vote in a "Joint Resolution." He accompanied his recommendation for such action to Congress with the following message:

> While I have regarded the annexation to be accomplished by treaty to be the most suitable form in which it could be affected, should Congress deem it proper to resort to any other expedient compatible with the Constitution . . . I stand prepared to yield my most prompt and active cooperation. The great question is, not as to the manner in which it shall be done, but whether it shall be accomplished or not.[2]

Tyler suggested that authority for Congress to take such a move came from its right to admit new states. Although critic howled that the proposal was unconstitutional, the House and Senate did ratify the agreement with the result that Texas became a part of the United States.

California represented the final area for conflict. The situation which existed in that province resembled the

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[1]David M. Pletcher, The Diplomacy of Annexation (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1973), pp. 139-149.

[2]Message of John Tyler, June 10, 1844, House Executive Document 271, 28th Congress, 1st Session.

one in Texas. The region was sparsely populated with native Mexicans, and settlers from America as well as other foreign powers were at first welcomed. These people found a situation in which Mexico exerted little control over the region so that they were left largely to their own devices. Since they had little or no loyalty to the central government, separatist movements sprang up as soon as large numbers of foreigners arrived. The Mexicans attempted to quell any actual uprisings and for a time were successful in avoiding a major revolution. However, after 1830, the area was remarkable only in its lack of stability.

This situation prompted several attempts on the part of the U.S. to acquire the region. The first came in 1835 when Secretary of State John Forsyth addressed the following remarks to Butler in Mexico City:

> /Since/ the port of St. Francisco, on the western coast of the United Mexican States, would be a most desirable place to resort for our numerous vessels engaged in the whaling business in the Pacific . . . /the President/ has directed that an addition should be made to your instructions relative to the negotiations for Texas. The main object is to secure within our limits the whole bay of St. Francisco. If you can enduce the Mexican government to agree to any lines which will effect this, you are authorized to offer a sum of half a million dollars . . . you may agree to any provision effecting the great object of securing the bay at St. Francisco.[1]

Nothing came from this overture. Butler indicated that he

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[1]Forsyth to Butler, August 6, 1835, DCUS, op. cit., p. 33.

had ". . . but slight hopes . . . of success" at negotiating such a purchase, but felt there was "no doubt of obtaining the privilege of using the port. . . ."[1]

The next time the subject of acquiring California came up occurred in 1842 when President Tyler stated that a settlement with the British on the Oregon question might be on lines favorable to them if they could succeed in persuading Mexico to sell part of Northern California to the United States. The British apparently failed in this regard for nothing ever came of this proposal. In the latter part of that year, however, an incident occurred which served only to heighten Mexican distrust of American motives. Commodore Thomas Jones, Commander of American naval forces in the Pacific, believing that the United States and Mexico had gone to war, sailed into the harbor of Monterey and demanded that the Mexicans surrender the fort. The shocked Mexicans quickly complied. As soon as he had been informed that no war existed, Jones saluted the Mexican flag and sailed out of the bay. American authorities were just as stunned as their Mexican counterparts and infinitely more horrified. They attempted to assuage the damaged Mexican feelings by relieving Jones of his command and promising to make restitution for his error. Nevertheless, the incident served to impair

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[1]Butler to Forsyth, December 27, 1835, ibid., pp. 305-306.

relations between the two countries even further.

During this period the United States had two agents in Mexico whose primary goal was the acquisition of California. One of these was Waddy Thompson, American Minister to Mexico, who, in his first letter to Daniel Webster, noted:

> As to Texas I regard it as of but little value compared with California--the richest, most beautiful, and healthiest country in the world . . . with the acquisition of upper California we would have . . . ascendancy on the Pacific. . . . I am profoundly satisfied that in its bearing on all of the interests of our country . . . the importance of the acquisition of California cannot be overestimated.[1]

A short time later, in a letter to President Tyler, he stated "I have but little doubt that I shall be able to accomplish your wishes and to add also the acquisition of upper California."[2] This prospect was favorably received in Washington. A short time later Thompson had a reply from Webster which advised him to proceed ". . . very cautiously and quite informally seeking rather to lead the Mexican secretary to talk on the subject than to lead directly to it yourself . . . the cession must be spoken of rather as a convenience to Mexico or a mode of discharging her debts."[3]

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[1]Thompson to Webster, April 29, 1842, ibid., p. 483.

[2]Thompson to Tyler, May 9, 1842, ibid., p. 485.

[3]Webster to Thompson, June 27, 1842, Quoted in Reeves, op. cit., p. 102.

Thompson proceeded to discuss the topic with Mexican authorities on several occasions, however, they indicated no interest in disposing of this part of their territory.

The other American agent concerned with acquiring California was Thomas Larkin, an American merchant in Monterey, who became a consul there in 1843. This energetic and intelligent man provided the U.S. with much valuable information. During the next three years, he faithfully reported on all activities in the region, mentioning the possibility of revolution on a number of occasions. He left no doubt of his desire for California to become a part of the United States, and was scarcely able to conceal his contempt for Mexican authorities. He stated on one occasion that ". . . if a new flag was respectfully planted, it would receive /the/ good will of the /wealthy and respectable/ of the country.[1] In his years as U.S. consul, the reports he sent represented the only dependable source of information on which U.S. authorities could rely.

The claims question, the annexation of Texas, and the desire on the part of certain Americans to acquire California did much to escalate the state of relations between the United States and Mexico, already somewhat heated, to a boiling point.

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[1]Larkin to Buchanan, April 2, 1846, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 839-841.

Chapter 2

THE IMPENDING CRISIS

As the year 1842 got under way, relations between the United States and Mexico, deteriorated still further. Nowhere was this more evident than in the diplomatic affairs of the two. In June, the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jose Maria de Bocanegra, protesting neutrality violations by citizens of the U.S., sent a series of stern notes to Secretary of State Webster. In one of them he stated:

> . . . the Mexican Republic has received nothing but severe injuries and afflictions from the citizens of the United States . . . which produces an incomprehensible state of things--a state neither of peace nor of war; but inflicting upon the Mexican Republic, the same injuries and inconveniences as if war had been declared. . . . Could proceedings more hostil (sic) on the part of the United States have taken place had that country been at war with the Mexican Republic? . . . Certainly not. . . .[1]

President Tyler felt the notes were insolent and deserving of a harsh reply. Accordingly Webster, after a delay sufficient to indicate that the United States was in no haste to answer, directed Waddy Thompson, U.S. Envoy in Mexico, to first rebuke the Mexican government for utilizing the unusual method of corresponding from the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs directly to the Secretary of State, and secondly to restate the U.S. position of neutrality. Thompson

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[1]Bocanegra to Webster, May 12, 1842, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 487-489.

complied with the directive, replying to the Mexican Minister with a harsh note that ended with a thinly disguised threat:

> Mr. de Bocanegra is pleased to say, that if war actually existed between the two countries, proceedings more hostile on the part of the United States could not have taken place. . . . This opinion, is yet abstract and theoretical. . . . The efficiency of American hostility has never been tried: the government has no desire to try it. It would not disturb the peace for the sake of showing how erroneously Mr. de Bocanegra has reasoned.[1]

Shortly thereafter Thompson sent word from Mexico that President Santa Anna had been talking freely of war with the U.S., and for a time it appeared that that condition might result. However, within a short time the Mexican government, for reasons known only to themselves, dispatched their first minister to the United States in three years, and the crisis was averted.[2]

The long and arduous task of annexing Texas to the United States was the issue which led ultimately to war. In August of 1843, de Bocanegra informed U.S. Envoy Thompson that

> Events which have been occurring . . . have appeared to afford grounds for doubting the sincerity and frankness of the conduct of the /U.S./. . . . The Mexican government has collected sufficient evidence . . . that a proposition is to be submitted to . . . the Congress of the United States . . . to incorporate them with the so-called Republic of Texas. . . . The President /of Mexico/ hopes /the Congress/ will defeat

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[1]Webster to Thompson, July 8, 1842, ibid., pp. 110-120.

[2]Reeves, op. cit., p. 99.

> a design so unjust . . . /but/ he has ordered the Undersigned to declare . . . that the Mexican government will consider equivalent to a declaration of war . . . the passage of an act for the incorporation of Texas with the territory of the United States.[1]

Thompson, in replying to the message stated that he was "astonished . . . if anything could excite such a feeling /of war/ it will be the constant repetition of these threats."[2] A short time later, Juan Almonte, Mexican Minister to the U.S., informed Secretary of State Upshur of the following: "If . . . the United States should . . . commit the unheard of act of violence /annexation/ the undersigned will consider his mission ended."[3] A lengthy series of verbal exchanges then took place, Mexico chastising the U.S. for designs on Texas, which it maintained still belonged to her, and the U.S. asserting its right to conduct affairs with Texas in any manner she chose. This impasse continued until May when a Colonel Thompson[4] arrived in Mexico with instructions to the American charge, Benjamin Green, to inform the Mexican government that a treaty of annexation had

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[1]Bocanegra to Thompson, August 23, 1843, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 555-557.

[2]Thompson to Bocanegra, August 24, 1843, ibid., pp. 557-558.

[3]Almonte to Upshur, November 3, 1843, ibid., pp. 556-567.

[4]No relation to the U.S. Minister to Mexico who had by this time resigned and whose affairs had been taken over by Benjamin Green, U.S. Charge.

been signed and submitted to the Senate. In complying with this order, Green stated that annexation "had been forced on the government of the U.S. in self defence, in consequence of the policy adopted by Great Britain in reference to the abolition of slavery in Texas." He went on to say that the U.S. would gladly "settle all questions between the two . . . on the most liberal and satisfactory terms.[1] Bocanegra replied in a most sarcastic manner,

> It is certainly wonderful that a government ennobled and governed by institutions so liberal and so well-founded in the known admitted principle of committing no aggression, and especially to guard and respect in every sentiment and in every manner the imprescribible rights of man in society, has proceeded to the negotiation, approval, and even transmission to the Senate of a treaty which indubitably and notoriously despoils Mexico of a Department, which by ownership and by possession belongs to her. . . .[2]

Bocanegra went on to state that the very fact that the U.S. had seen fit to negotiate on the matter proved that Mexico had been injured and was the rightful owner of Texas. There was every indication that Mexico intended no compromise on this complex issue.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1844, as Congress and the Tyler administration contemplated the annexation question, Mexico and the U.S. exchanged heated correspondence regarding

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[1]Green to Bocanegra, May 23, 1844, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 586-587.

[2]Bocanegra to Green, May 30, 1844, ibid., pp. 587-591.

the matter. Wilson Shannon replaced Thompson as U.S. Minister to Mexico, and after a cordial welcome and reception by Santa Anna, began immediate and vigorous defence of American policy. In one of his first letters to Manuel Rijon, who had assumed the post of Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, he warned in language which could only be considered threatening that "the United States cannot, while the measure of annexation is pending, stand quietly by and permit . . . an invasion by Mexico /of Texas/." He did promise, however, that the United States was prepared to "adjust all questions growing out of /annexation/ . . . on the most liberal terms."[1] Rijon immediately replied, and in a lengthy letter, went back through the whole issue regarding Texas, defending Mexican policy in every instance.[2] Shannon bristled at the tone of the reply, despite the fact that such was commonplace, and demanded that the note be withdrawn."[3] Rijon, of course, refused to accede to this request. Shannon, acting on his own, then terminated communications with the Mexican government.[4] The situation at Mexico City thus remained at an impasse during the next crucial weeks.

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[1]Shannon to Rijon, October 14, 1844, DCUS, op. cit., p. 646.

[2]Rijon to Shannon, October 31, 1844, ibid., pp. 654-663.

[3]Shannon to Rijon, November 4, 1844, ibid., p. 663.

[4]Shannon to Rijon, November 8, 1844, ibid., p. 666.

In Washington when Almonte heard that the U.S. Congress had passed the joint resolution for the annexation of Texas, he wrote to Calhoun denouncing it as ". . . an act of aggression, the most unjust which can be found recorded in the counsels of modern history--namely that of despoiling a friendly nation like Mexico of a considerable portion of her territory." After further stating that ". . . the said law /for annexation of Texas/ can in no wise invalidate the rights on which Mexico relies, to recover the above mentioned province of Texas. . . ." He concluded by informing the Secretary that "The Undersigned will say . . . his mission near this government has ceased from this day."[1] The State Department received the note with genuine regret, and James Buchanan, recently appointed Secretary immediately replied in a most conciliatory manner. But Almonte never received this communication, for he had already left, officially terminating his mission.

When the Mexican government received word of the passage of a joint resolution for annexation, Luis Cuevas, still another Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations, in a tone reflecting sorrow more than anger, informed Shannon that due to this act of Congress ". . . diplomatic relations between the two countries cannot be continued."[2] Shannon, after

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[1]Almonte to Calhoun, March 6, 1845, ibid., p. 700.

[2]Cuevas to Shannon, March 28, 1845, ibid., p. 705.

an exchange of notes with Cuevas, informed Buchanan he was preparing to demand his passports and further stated that "It is utterly useless to think of arranging our difficulties with Mexico in an amicable way for the present or for some time to come--all parties here are clamorous for war. . . ."[1]

Shannon spoke correctly in his assessment of the depth of feeling in Mexico. The public outcry against the loss of territory, probably accentuated by fears that the U.S. would not stop with simply acquiring Texas, exploded with emotional outbursts. This hostile attitude can best be illustrated by statements contained in Mexican newspapers of the day, of which the following is a typical example: "Is it possible that Mexico is a nation of slaves, a wandering tribe, to be the prey of other nations? . . . War and only war can save us--war without quarter!"[2] President Herrera, appointed only recently to the office, felt compelled to take a number of steps designed to bring Mexico to a state of readiness for war. These included a request for money from the treasury, provisioning and strengthening various outposts, and investigations of possible foreign financial assistance.[3] Despite

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[1]Shannon to James Buchanan, Secretary of State, April 6, 1845, ibid., p. 710.

[2]La Voz del Pueblo, March 26, 1845, Quoted in Smith, op. cit., p. 434.

[3]Smith, op. cit., pp. 87-88.

such actions, no official announcement of war came forth. Herrera undoubtedly hoped that some arrangement could be made which would allow Mexico to save face, and yet avoid the outbreak of war with the U.S. So in lieu of actually beginning hostilities, the Mexican government contented itself with internal actions and harsh pronouncements.

On the American side, annexation also provided a dilemma of sorts. President Tyler felt that steps should be taken to protect Texas during negotiations and final action on the matter. At the same time he wished to avoid any appearance of hostile moves on our part which might be construed by the Mexicans as warlike. Accordingly he requested that Shannon inform them of our desire to afford protection to Texas until the final outcome of the situation was known, and he dispatched troops to the Southwest and ordered war vessels stationed in the Gulf of Mexico to hold themselves in readiness. When these steps became known in Mexico, war fever heightened still further.

Into this highly inflammatory situation stepped the first "dark horse" in American political history, James K. Polk. Nominated at a Democratic convention which had seemed hopelessly deadlocked, Polk was an experienced and able politician who had served as Speaker of the House for the previous four years and governor of Tennessee for two terms. Henry Clay, a Whig making his third attempt at the Presidency, provided the opposition. The Democrats, as might be expected,

drafted a highly expansionist platform which called for the immediate annexation of Texas and the occupation of Oregon all the way to 54 40'. These issues, although not the only prominent ones of the campaign, proved nonetheless to be the decisive ones. Clay appeared to be vacillating on the crucial Texas question when he stated on one occasion that he favored its annexation, and on another that he favored postponing action on the matter. Whether or not this proved to be the crucial issue in the election would be difficult to determine, but the little-known Polk defeated Clay in an extremely close race with the difference proving to be only 38,000 votes. Indeed a switch of only 5,000 votes in New York would have swung the election to Clay. Much has been made of the issue of "Manifest Destiny" in the contest of 1844, and certainly this was an important aspect, however, to state that the Democrats received a clear mandate for the annexation of Texas from the American people, would be to grossly overemphasize one issue in an election of many.

As the Polk Administration took office there was apparently a sincere desire on its part to improve relations with the Mexicans. However, the situation south of the Rio Grande was anything but conducive to such a task. As has been noted, public feeling in Mexico was overwhelmingly against any negotiations with the United States, and from all outward appearances, highly in favor of an immediate declaration of war. The current President, General Herrera,

named to the post following the ouster and subsequent exile of Santa Anna in December of 1844, proved to be a poor substitute for the departed dictator. He lacked the personal strength and qualities of leadership which made it possible for Santa Anna to govern.[1] As such, for the entire length of his stay as President, Herrera encountered innumerable plots to overthrow his government.

Internally Herrera faced two major problems. The first of these concerned the condition of the national treasury. Funds simply did not exist even to meet ordinary expenditures of the government, much less make any payments toward the United States. This proved to be an exceptionally hard problem to overcome. The army became Herrera's second major concern for it rapidly became less manageable. Unsettled conditions existed in nearly every camp due to a lack of sufficient funds to pay, feed, and clothe the individual soldiers. Also a certain group of generals, most notably Mariano Paredes, became cognizant of the fact that they had the ability to topple any existing government. One had only to look at the past several months to know that this was true. Consequently, they continuously plotted one scheme after another.[2]

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[1]George L. Rives, The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848, Volume II (New York: Chas. Scribeners Sons, 1913), p. 53.

[2]Ibid., pp. 53-54.

To meet these challenges, Herrera took a number of steps. To begin with, he issued a call in June of 1845 requesting volunteers for the Mexican army. He did this partly to raise troop levels to a sufficient number, but mostly for public relations in order to counteract the growing public demand for action. Since the Mexican Congress had provided no funds for such an undertaking it was necessary to issue further orders requiring all who volunteered to pay for their own outfitting and upkeep. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that few volunteered. The next step involved calling the adjourned Mexican Congress into special session. He did this with extreme reluctance, for he feared what steps a body responsive to public demands might take. However, when it became apparent that Texas would agree to the annexation proposal, he had little choice. This body heard a report from Secretary Cuevas on July 16, that the Texas Congress had indeed approved annexation and the U.S. was in the process of moving troops into position to protect the newly acquired territory. The body took no drastic action at that time, however, one month later when it became apparent that American troops occupied parts of Texas as far south as the Rio Grande, the Herrera government felt that some strong action must be taken. Accordingly the Minister of Foreign Relations proposed to the Congress that "As soon as the government ascertains that the department of Texas has united itself to the American Union or that troops of the latter have

invaded it, it shall declare that the nation is at war with the United States of North America."[1] Although the Congress accepted on the same day an administration proposal authorizing the seeking of a foreign loan, they took no action on the war measure.

In August the Mexicans held an official election to fill the unexpired portion of Santa Anna's term as President. Although there were several candidates, the one who quite possibly could have garnered the most support, Paredes, chose for numerous reasons not to run. Thus, Herrera received a solid majority. He then decided to form an entirely new cabinet, selecting for the crucial post of Foreign Minister Manuel de la Pena y Pena, a moderate who favored some type of settlement with the U.S. rather than war. The election and new cabinet did nothing to quell the public outcry against the administration, which bow found itself openly accused of cowardice. The government desperately needed to take some action to pacify the populace. Finally, it decided to move additional troops into the area on the Texas border to reinforce General Mariano Arista, a loyal friend, who was there with three thousand men. These additional troops, however, fell under the command of General Pardes, who enjoyed the public outcry against the administration and was loath to take steps which might gain public support for it. Hence these

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[1]Ibid., p. 59.

troops never assumed their intended positions. Thus, the situation in Mexico in the fall of 1845 remained extremely fluid.

James K. Polk entered office in March of 1845 as the youngest man ever to serve as U.S. President. Perhaps best known for his reputation as a Jacksonian protege, he found himself nicknamed "Young Hickory" by his supporters, and set out to live up to this label. Indeed, the aging ex-President had exerted a great deal of influence on him in the past, and continued to do so after he assumed the Presidency. As one attempts to match Presidents with the times in which they served, Polk seems ideally suited to govern during this period of expansionist fervor. He possessed a vision of America as the most moral and deserving of nations, and he had no qualms about pushing for the ultimate in terms of territorial fulfillment. In addition, he faced no moral dilemmas over such pressing national questions as slavery, which might have disturbed other men. Of all the qualities which he possessed, however, none served him better than his consumate skill in politics and manipulation. Hardened by years in the chaotic arena of Tennessee politics, Polk applied these tactics almost immediately upon his entrance into office.[1]

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[1]Charles Sellers, James K. Polk Continentalist (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. v-vi, 214.

Two problems confronted Polk even before he took his oath. The first of these concerned the selection of a Cabinet. Although this is frequently a trying process, Polk faced even more problems than normal. He owed his nomination and election to a large number of groups and factions, each one demanding that they be rewarded with a high cabinet position. Accordingly, the President-elect made numerous tentative lists of choices, only to be forced to revise them once again. The only name which remained stationary was that of James Buchanan. He had impressed Polk on a number of occasions with the depth of his knowledge on foreign affairs and the crucial post of Secretary of State was reserved for him. To add to his desirability, Buchanan was a Pennsylvanian, the state which had contributed most heavily to the nomination and now was demanding a suitable reward. Finally, Polk named the other cabinet members, and although there were outcries of displeasure from some quarters, Polk managed to mollify the great majority of his party.[1]

The second problem confronting Polk before taking office concerned the Texas annexation question. He committed himself wholeheartedly to bringing the territory into the Union at an early stage in his campaign for the nomination of his party. The method of arranging this proved to be a thoray problem for Polk. He gave his approval to the Tyler

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[1]Ibid., pp. 165-167, 194-203.

plan of accomplishing this by joint resolution, but when this arrangement appeared to be faltering, Polk, although only President-elect, decided to take matters into his own hands. Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri opposed to the joint resolution method, instead proposed that annexation be negotiated by commissioners appointed by both the U.S. and Texas. Since the Senator was highly influential, his support appeared to be crucial if annexation was accomplished. Polk, therefore, met with some Benton supporters and proposed that the House resolution be combined with the Benton plan leaving the choice of alternative methods of annexation to the President. He then privately gave assurances that he would choose the negotiation method upon taking office. This plan received the reluctant support of Benton and his supporters, who thereupon voted for the bill which passed by a slim margin of 27-25. Polk had cast himself into the annexation fray, and was crucial in securing the end result.[1]

In his inaugural address, the new President attempted to exploit the nationalistic spirit so prevalent throughout the country. In this enterprise he achieved remarkable success. Portraying the annexation of Texas as a project which would greatly strengthen the country, Polk pledged he would strive to complete the union at the earliest possible date. He also discussed at length the possibility of foreign

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[1]Ibid., pp. 205-208.

interference in the project. Stating that "The world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our government.", he asserted that foreign powers should look on the annexation as "the peaceful acquisition of a territory once [our] own."[1]

By far the largest outcry came not from Polk's remarks concerning Texas, but by his bold assertion that the U.S. title to all of the Oregon Territory was "clear and unquestionable." Since this country at that time shared occupation of the region with the British, the statement came as quite a surprise. He did not attempt to defend it in legal terms, but rather chose to emphasize the fact that since millions of settlers had gone into the Western regions, the American title had been perfected. It was then the duty of the government to provide protection for these citizens, and extend its laws "over the distant regions which they have selected for their homes." Finally, the government should be ready at all times to facilitate the movement of these regions toward full statehood.[2]

Although there were scattered protests throughout the country to the President's Oregon statements, for the most part the American public responded enthusiastically. This

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[1]Henry Steele Commager, Ed., Documents of American History (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1934), p. 308.

[2]Ibid.

was especially true in the western regions where "Oregon fever" ran highest. Newspapers and politicians in particular scrambled to get aboard an Oregon bandwagon. A public clamor began for the acquisition of all of that territory, and not "one foot of soil or a drop of its water" should be "surrendered" to England.[1]

The British reaction to Polk's statements ran predictably adverse. For the American President to ignore twenty-seven years of protracted negotiations, and assert that his country held claim to all the Oregon Territory was unthinkable. Even Britain's peace loving foreign secretary, Lord Aberdeen, felt compelled to state that Polk's declaration might very well touch off a train of events which would ultimately lead to war. The British government instructed the Admiralty to dispatch a frigate immediately to the area in order to underscore their determination not to yield on the question. The Colonial Office was informed that since war with the U.S. appeared imminent, they should take measures to ascertain the military situation in Oregon. In taking these steps, the government reflected British public opinion on the matter, which wholeheartedly favored no compromise with the Americans.[2]

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[1]S. Penn, Jr. to Polk, July 13, 1845, Quoted in Sellers, op. cit., p. 237.

[2]Ibid., p. 235.

Polk's intentions regarding Oregon became clear a few months after his inaugural when he directed Secretary of State Buchanan to submit a proposal to the British which called for a compromise at the line of 49, a position which the U.S. had assumed frequently in the past. Clearly, Polk intended his inaugural remarks only to prepare the British for his offer of compromise. However, the British Minister in Washington, Richard Pakenham, refused even to submit the American proposal to his superiors. Instead, he delivered a resounding rejection wholly on his own. Polk then withdrew the compromise offer and negotiations on the matter ceased.[1] When warned by Buchanan that danger existed in having both the Oregon and Texas pots boiling at the same time, Polk hotly replied that the U.S. shoulddo its duty and leave the rest to God and country.[2]

Meanwhile, in regard to the Mexican situation, Polk attempted to repair the damage done to Mexican-American relations by the annexation of Texas. To accomplish this task he appointed William S. Parrot as a "confidential agent of the United States government." Parrott, although inexperienced as a diplomat, had spent considerable time in Mexico, first as a dentist, and then later as a merchant. He possessed

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[1]Frederick Merk, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 63-65.

[2]Quoted in Sellers, op. cit., p. 223.

contacts with officials in the Herrera administration and Polk hoped he could utilize these to "reach the President and other high officers of the Mexican government and especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs; and by every honorable effort to convince them that it is the true interest of their country . . . to restore friendly relations between the two Republics."[1] In addition to this assignment he was to faithfully report back on his impressions of the Mexican scene at every opportunity. Parrott was not to disclose his official capacity unless he ". . . clearly ascertain/ed/ that they are willing to renew our diplomatic intercourse." In that event, he could ". . . state that the United States will send a Minister to Mexico as soon as they receive authentic information that he will be kindly received."[2] Buchanan authorized a sum of eight dollars per day plus expenses to be paid to Parrott for his services.

At the same time, Polk ordered Wilson Shannon, official U.S. Minister to Mexico, home to Washington. For his handling of affairs while in Mexico City, he received a sharp rebuke from Buchanan, who bluntly informed him that his service would not be needed any longer. To carry out vital functions in that country, Polk called on John Black,then

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[1]James Buchanan to William S. Parrott, March 28, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 164.

[2]Ibid.

United States Consul at Mexico City. One of his first tasks was "to ascertain from the Mexican government whether they would receive an envoy from the United States with full power to adjust all the questions in dispute between the two governments."[1] Polk thus had two representatives in Mexico, both seeking the same information.

Parrott proceeded to Mexico City where officials there accorded him a cordial welcome despite the fact that a pending claim made him technically persona non grata. The Mexicans apparently knew of his status from the beginning, a fact which he attributed to "those opposed to our interests," by which he meant the British.[2] His first letters back to Washington contained information concerning the widespread hostility toward the U.S. then prevalent in Mexico. He concluded, however, that the Mexican government would not declare war on the U.S. He based this conclusion primarily on the fact that depleted finances made the prospects of winning such a war almost nil. He also felt that internal prospects for a civil war were such that any external involvements would be of secondary importance. In August, he reported to Buchanan that the new Herrera Administration was opposed to war and favored

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[1]Buchanan to John Black, September 17, 1845, ibid., p. 168.

[2]William S. Parrott to Buchanan, May 29, 1845, ibid., p. 718.

settlement with the United States over the Texas question and further:

> I have good reasons to believe that, an Envoy from the United States would not only, be well received; but that his arrival would be hailed with joy--An Envoy possessing suitable qualifications for this court, might with comparative ease, settle, over a breakfast, the most important national question, while such as we have lately had here would make matters worse.[1]

This communication President Polk gratefully received in Washington. He submitted it, along with corroborating opinions from Black and F. M. Dimond, U.S. Consul at Vera Cruz, to a cabinet meeting on September 16. After some discussion the body unanimously agreed to reopen diplomatic relations with Mexico, but to keep such information secret due to possible outside interference from such powers as the British and French. One "great object" of this mission would be to ". . . adjust a permanent boundary between Mexico and the U.S., and that in doing this the Minister would be instructed to purchase for a pecuniary consideration Upper California and New Mexico." Polk felt that this territory might be had for fifteen or twenty millions, but he was ready to pay "forty millions for it if it could not be had for less." Although it was decided at this meeting that the mission should be undertaken at once, in a subsequent session the following day the group decided to order Black "to ascertain

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[1]Parrott to Buchanan, August 26, 1845, ibid., p. 747.

officially from the Mexican government whether a minister would be received."[1] Black lost no time in consulting Pena, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Pena, although hedging for a time, finally presented Black with a statement which read in part:

> . . . although the Mexican Nation is deeply injured by the United States, through the acts committed by them, in the Department of Texas, which belongs to this nation, my government is disposed to receive the Commissioner of the United States, who may come to this Capital, with full powers from his government, to settle the present dispute, in a peaceful reasonable and honourable manner. . . .[2]

In a subsequent conversation, Pena seemingly attached a great deal of importance to the person selected for the mission stating that ". . . for the good of both countries . . . a person suitable in every respect, should be sent, endued with the necessary qualities, and not one against whom the government or people of Mexico, should unfortunately entertain a fixt prejudice . . . for example a man as Poinsett. . . ."[3] Pena also requested that for appearances sake, that a U.S. naval force off Vera Cruz be withdrawn. Once this information was received in Washington, the cabinet concurred in Polk's

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[1]James K. Polk, The Diary of James K. Polk, Milton Quaife, ed., Volume I (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1910), pp. 34-35.

[2]Manuel de la Pena y Pena to John Black, October 15, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 763.

[3]Black to Buchanan, October 17, 1845, ibid., p. 765.

decision that the mission proceed at once.

The subject of whom to send on such a delicate mission arose at the first cabinet meeting where Parrott's information was made known. After some discussion on the matter, Polk proposed the name of John Slidell, U.S. Representative from Louisiana. No mention is made of any other choices considered, and his name received unanimous approval from the cabinet.[1]

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[1]Polk, op. cit., p. 34.

Chapter 3

JOHN SLIDELL

John Slidell was born in 1793 in New York City to a family of considerable means. His father occupied the post of president of the Tradesman's Insurance Company as well as a similar position with the Mechanics Bank.[1] The family was quite prominent on the social scene and, in fact, John's younger sister married Matthew Perry who was later to win fame in Japan.[2] Historians know little of the early years of Slidell's life, however, he must have been a young scholar of some note, for he graduated at the age of seventeen from what was then Columbia College. On his graduation he accepted a post as European representative of a New York firm which gave him the opportunity to travel widely. He also learned several languages, a fact which would later become significant. After the failure of the firm in 1817, Slidell returned to New York City, where he decided to abandon his career as a lawyer. During the next two years he became involved with the wife of a theatrical producer with whom he was caught in a compromising situation. This affair, plus the fighting of

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[1]Albert Lewie Diket, John Slidell and the Community He Represented in the Senate, 1853-1861 (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1958), p. 2.

[2]Louis Martin Sears, John Slidell (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1925), p. 5.

a duel with an unnamed opponent caused him to reach the conclusion that New York was not suited to his tastes, and he moved to New Orleans in 1819.[1]

Life in New Orleans proved agreeable to Slidell as he quickly set up a lucrative law practice and it was not long before he was invited to argue a case before the Louisiana Supreme Court. He appeared frequently before that body in the next few years. In 1828 he felt compelled to enter politics and launched a campaign for a U.S. Congressional seat from a New Orleans district. He supported Presidential candidate Andrew Jackson ardently, but while Jackson won handily, Slidell lost his initial try at politics. Despite his loss, he could term the effort a success because, in addition to added prominence, Jackson repaid Slidell's support by naming him U.S. District Attorney for New Orleans.[2] Events over the next few years placed a strain on the relationship between Slidell and the President, who evidently became convinced that his political appointee was supporting John C. Calhoun on the touchy millification question and refused his request for a diplomatic post.[3] Evidence that Slidell had

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[1]Charles R. Craig, "John Slidell, Louisiana Politico," (unpublished Thesis, Tulane University, New Orleans, 1948), Quoted in Diket, op. cit., p. 5.

[2]Sears, op. cit., p. 11.

[3]Diket, op. cit., p. 25.

fallen from favor with the President is seen in the latter's letter to Martin Van Buren in 1833 regarding the untrustworthiness of Slidell in which he said ". . . letter is to put you on your guard of this man. . . ."[1]

Slidell returned to the political scene in 1834 when he made an unsuccessful attempt to win a U.S. Senate seat. This failure instead of discouraging him, made him even more determined to succeed, and he disposed of much of his law practice in order to concentrate his efforts fully on politics. At this same time, he met a young Creole girl of prominent social standing, Marie Mathilde Deslonde, and married her.[2] Despite the difference in their ages (she was 20, he 42) she proved to be a faithful companion throughout the rest of his life. In 1836 Slidell tried for the U.S. Senate a second time and again was unsuccessful. Undeterred he campaigned for a seat in the Louisiana State Legislature and won an overwhelming victory. While there he did little speaking, preferring instead to make his mark by performing outstanding committee work. Buoyed by his success in this endeavor, Slidell made a third attempt at a U.S. Senate seat in 1838, but was unsuccessful again. He retained his seat in the State Legislature that year, but two years

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[1]Quoted in Sears, op. cit., p. 13.

[2]Craig quoted in Diket, p. 7.

later lost it in the Whig sweep of 1840.[1]

In 1842 Slidell made a fourth try for a U.S. Senate seat which turned out to be no more successful than the previous three. Fortune must have taken pity on such a persevering man, for in 1843 Louisiana due to population growth was granted an additional seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and in a special election Slidell emerged victorious. Arriving in Washington, he displayed the same characteristics which had made him a success in the Louisiana Legislature, namely a willingness to sit in the background, while becoming a persuasive force in numerous committee assignments. He successfully sponsored several pieces of legislation, among them bills to increase postal service between New Orleans and Washington D.C., and one which would exempt from duties cotton coming into the U.S. from Texas.[2] His first speech in Congress was one in defense of Andrew Jackson who in a mystery-shrouded affair, had been fined one thousand dollars by a certain Judge Hall in 1815.[3] For this he received a thank-you note from Martin Van Buren, who was at the time marshalling support for a try at the Democratic

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[1]Diket, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

[2]Sears, op. cit., p. 25.

[3]Congressional Globe, 28th Congress, 1st Session, January 2, 1844, p. 96.

Presidential nomination. On April 27, 1844, Slidell made what for him was an elaborate speech on the floor of Congress during which he assessed the entire economic situation which existed in the country at the time. This speech, in which he attributed the financial depression of the early 1840's to over production, extravagance on the part of many, and generally poor currency, won him some renown as an economic expert.

The election of 1844 proved to be crucial in making a national reputation for Slidell. He supported James K. Polk for the Democratic Presidential nomination, and success in this venture led to his return to Louisiana where he set up an organization for the fall election. Since he was unopposed in his own bid to return to Congress, he devoted full time to insuring a Democratic victory in his state. In so doing he involved himself in the so-called "Plaquemines Vote Frauds" which damaged his reputation to some degree. Whigs, who normally were able to carry the New Orleans district, had for years been accused of denying foreign-born U.S. citizens access to voting booths. Slidell, along with other Democratic leaders, hired a boat on election day to carry these persons to a nearby parish, Plaquemines, where they voted for Democratic candidates. Losing the state by a slim margin, Whigs protested the affair claiming that the foreign-born citizens had voted illegally. Slidell led the defense against the charges, stating that since Plaquemines is in the same district

as New Orleans, no harm had been done. He also brought charges against the Whigs for alleged vote frauds in other districts. Although he was successful in his defense of the tactics, his name became associated by many with shady politics.[1]

On his return to Congress, Slidell busied himself with sponsoring several pieces of legislation. Because he himself was a dedicated worker, he offered a bill which sought to deprive Congressmen of their Per Diem expenses if they were absent from their job for reasons other than illness.[2] Later he proposed a resolution that the President be required to report to Congress all instances involving embezzlement of public funds by officials of the government.[3] He also began work on a proposed constitutional amendment which would have radically altered the method of electing the President by replacing the electoral college with a system which allowed for direct election by the people.[4]

In his fifty-two years, John Slidell had proven himself to possess the qualities of intelligence, foresight, diligence,

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[1]Diket, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[2]Congressional Globe, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, February 21, 1845, p. 327.

[3]Congressional Globe, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, January 23, 1845, pp. 309-310.

and a dogged perseverance. He was to need all of these if he was to successfully complete the mission set forth for him by James K. Polk.

Chapter 4

THE MISSION

The John Slidell Mission to Mexico has been a subject of controversy among historians almost from the time of its inception. Differences of opinion have existed about nearly every phase of the operation, but particularly has this been true concerning the intentions of President Polk during this time. Many historians, especially those writing in the first part of this century, have praised Polk, and found no ulterior motives present in the Slidell Mission. Others, including many distinguished persons writing more recently, have concluded that the President was guilty of intrigue and downright deception in sending an Envoy to the Mexicans. To one eminent scholar, the mission and subsequent events offer proof that President Polk "baited the Mexicans into a war."[1] Another states that Polk had intended all along for the mission to be unsuccessful since it was "coercive" from the beginning.[2] Still another more recent writer, has concluded that Polk indeed offered the Mexicans a compromise by sending Slidell to negotiate, but one that was intentionally so

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[1]For this opinion see Samuel Eliot Morison, Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 560-561.

[2]See Richard Stenberg, "The Failure of Polk's Mexican War Intrigue of 1845," Pacific Historical Review, IV (1935), pp. 39-68.

severe that the chances of its acceptance were minimal. The burden and responsibility for the consequences of its rejection would then lay solely on them.[1] A thorough examination of the mission from its beginnings down through its unsuccessful conclusion, substantiates none of the foregoing opinions. Instead, a picture of a man without concerted policies struggling against the press of a dual crisis in foreign affairs emerges.

Polk's attempt to alleviate the Mexican half of the crisis began in earnest soon after the Cabinet agreed on the choice of John Slidell to undertake the mission to Mexico. The President decided to write him a personal letter in order to underscore the importance of his task. In the letter, along with informing him of his selection, Polk ordered Slidell to keep the mission a "profound secret . . . for the reason that if it was known in advance . . . Brittish (sic) French and other Foreign Ministers . . . might take measures to thwart it."[2] In his reply to Buchanan's official letter informing him of his selection, Slidell expressed great surprise at being chosen. He stated that he did not believe

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[1]See Shomer S. Zwelling, "The Graebner Theses Concerning the Diplomacy of American Expansion During the Mid-Nineteenth Century: A Critical Appraisal" (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Iowa, 1968), pp. 121-122.

[2]Milo Milton Quaife, ed., The Diary of James K. Polk (Chicago: A. G. McClurg and Company, 1910), p. 34.

that the United States and Mexico should go to war and considered Mexican intimations to that effect as mere braggadocio, for although he had ". . . no very exalted idea of the calibre of Mexican intellect [I] cannot imagine that any one . . . could have so small a modicum of sense as to think seriously of going to war with the United States."[1] He also asked Buchanan to take up the subject of the secrecy of the mission with the President, for although the President had ". . . enjoined on me the strictest secrecy . . . I was obliged to make an exception in favor of Mrs. S. . . ." whom he felt certain to deduce what was going on and ". . . I am not one of those who believe that a woman cannot keep a secret."[2]

In what must be regarded as an excellent example of foresignt, Slidell mentioned some doubts concerning the mission, ". . . I had not thought that the [Mexican] government would have been prepared so soon to have received from us an accredited agent." He further stated his belief that ". . . they desire to settle amicably all the questions in dispute between us, but will they dare in the present distracted state of the country to give so great a shock to what is there called public opinion?"[3] Despite the appearances of future

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[1]John Bassett Moore, ed., The Works of James Buchanan (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1909), p. 264.

[2]Ibid., p. 265.

[3]Ibid.

problems, Slidell seemed anxious for the mission to get underway. Polk felt that the mission should proceed at once, for he undoubtedly wished to take advantage of the chaotic Mexican scene which made acceptance of American terms greater. Buchanan and others, however, suggested that it might be best to wait until it could be officially ascertained that Mexico was willing to receive a representative from the U.S. Polk finally agreed that such should be the case.

Early in November, word came from John Black, U.S. Consul in Mexico City, that the Mexican government was indeed ready to receive an envoy. Accordingly, Secretary of State James Buchanan drew up a list of instructions for Slidell, which the Cabinet discussed and approved unanimously in a meeting on November 8.[1] In his dispatch to Slidell, Buchanan informed him of the Mexican acceptance and urged him to ". . . repair without delay to your post and present yourself to the Mexican government as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the U.S."[2] The two great objectives of his mission were "To counteract the influence of Foreign Powers exerted against the U.S. in Mexico, and to restore those ancient relations of peace and good will which formerly

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[1]Quaife, op. cit., p. 92.

[2]James Buchanan to John Slidell, November 10, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 172.

existed."[1] Polk and Buchanan apparently entertained a real fear of foreign interference, since before they informed Slidell about how to deal with the Mexicans, they told him to reject any proposal which would allow mediation by a European power. The Secretary noted that the "First subject which will demand your attention is the claims of our citizens on Mexico." He then traced the history of this problem back through the awarding of $2,026,139.68 to American citizens by the Board of Commissioners, and the subsequent defaulting on payments by the Mexican government. Buchanan informed Slidell that:

> It will be your duty in a prudent but friendly spirit, to impress the Mexican government with a sense of their great injustice towards the U.S. as well as of the patient forbearance which has been exercised by us. [2]This cannot be expected to endure much longer.[2]

Clearly, the President expected his Envoy to deliver a warning to the Mexicans if they chose to ignore this debt.

The Americans understood that, due to the depressed state of Mexican finances, it would be difficult to pay these claims in money. "Fortunately, the joint resolution of Congress. . . 'for annexing Texas' . . . presents the means of satisfying these claims. . . . The Question of boundary may be adjusted in such a manner as to cast the burden of the debt due to American claimants upon their own government."[3]

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid., p. 176.

[3]Ibid., p. 177.

There followed a lengthy description of the history of the boundaries in that area, Buchanan concluding that the Texas claim to the Del Norte River was absolute despite Mexican protestations that the Neucas formed the true boundary. As to New Mexico and California, those subjects presented different problems. They had always belonged to Mexico and the U.S. could not dispute that fact. However, the nature of these holdings was such that it would surely be advantageous to Mexico to get rid of them if she could profitably do so. New Mexico had always proved difficult to administer, and, as to California, it appeared doubtful that Mexico could ever hope to reestablish complete authority in that area. "Under these circumstances, it is the desire of the President that you should use your best efforts to obtain a cession of [these provinces] from Mexico. . . . Could you accomplish this object, you would render immense service to your country and establish an enviable reputation for yourself."[1] Buchanan further ordered Slidell to consider the annexation of Texas to be an accomplished fact which at no time should be called into question.

For all the above considerations, Buchanan authorized him to offer a sliding scale of payments to Mexico. If that government merely recognized the claim to disputed territory that the Texas Republic had set forth in 1836, the U.S.

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[1]Ibid., p. 181.

government would assume the claims of its citizens against Mexico. If, however, the Mexican government was willing to part with New Mexico as well as recognize the "proper" Texas boundary, "You are . . . authorized to offer to assume the payment of all the just claims of our citizens against Mexico, and, in addition, to pay five millions of dollars. . . ."[1] If, by some chance, Slidell could persuade Mexico to part with California, "Money would be no object when compared to the value of the acquisition." The Secretary directed him to offer as much as twenty-five million dollars along with the assumption of American claims if he could acquire that province with a boundary line that would include the city of Monterey. If it was not possible to obtain a cession which ran that far south, he could pay twenty million for ". . . any boundary commencing at any point on the western line of New Mexico, and running due west to the Pacific, so as to include the bay and harbor of San Francisco."[2] Of course, Buchanan stipulated that these amounts were maximums, and if they could be had for less, so much the better. He warned Slidell to be on his guard against the machinations of foreign powers, especially those of France and Great Britain. In particular it would be "most disastrous" if California was ceded to one of them. In order to prepare Slidell for a possible cool reception, as well as impress him with the importance of the mission,

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[1]Ibid., p. 179. [2]Ibid., p. 181.

Buchanan concluded his instructions by saying:

> Your mission is one of the most delicate and important which has ever been confided to a citizen of the United States. The people to whom you will be sent are proverbially jealous and they have been irritated against the United States by recent events. . . . To conciliate their good will is indispensable to your success. . . . You may have to endure their unjust reproaches with equanimity. It would be difficult to raise a point of honor between the United States and so feeble and degraded a Power as Mexico. This reflection will teach you to bear and forbear much. . . . We are sincerely desirous to be on good terms with Mexico. . . .[1]

Despite the fact that the initial instructions were long and complicated, scarcely a week had passed when the Envoy received additional orders. Polk felt it necessary to explain to Slidell that these negotiations should be brought to a conclusion ". . . with as little delay as may be consistent with their success . . ." since the President ". . . desires to submit the result to Congress before the termination of the approaching session. . . ."[2] They also sent the entire list of American claimants with this dispatch, and instructed Slidell to make certain that any agreement with the Mexicans on this question included all American claims down to the signing of the convention which had allowed them in November of 1843. In a post script, Buchanan felt it necessary to tell his Envoy to have any

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[1]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

[2]Buchanan to Slidell, November 19, 1845, ibid., p. 183.

treaty concluded ratified by the Mexican government before he brought it home.[1]

Various persons in Mexico had recently informed the President that the Mexicans were now ready to negotiate since conditions in that country were steadily deteriorating. Polk thus became convinced that his policy of taking a strong stand in foreign affairs was working. Accordingly, he wrote a letter to Slidell which accompanied this latest dispatch. In it he warned ominously that "If unfortunately you fail to effect a satisfactory adjustment of the pending differences between the two countries . . . we must take redress for the wrongs and injuries we have suffered into our own hands, and I will call on Congress to provide the proper remedies."[2]

Armed with his instructions, Slidell set sail for Vera Cruz on November 20, 1845 aboard the sloop of war St. Marys. He arrived in that city on November 30, to be greeted courteously by officials there. A leading citizen, Mr. Hargous, told him that he would find the Mexican government hard to deal with since they expected a heavy indemnity from the U.S. for recognition of the Rio Del Norte boundary. Slidell intended to "correct this impression" as soon as he possibly could. He announced his intention to leave for

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[1]Ibid., pp. 183-184.

[2]Polk to Slidell, November 10, 1845, Polk Papers, University of Iowa.

Mexico City the following day, but confided his fears to Buchanan that the journey would end as many of his predecessors had, with a robbery at the hands of bandits who were extremely numerous throughout the country. Although he would be furnished with an escort, this did not alleviate his fears since these had proven ". . . not always . . . sufficient protection" and he took the ". . . precaution to cut from my instructions, the words fixing the different sums which I am to offer in certain contingencies."[1]

Although the American government obviously desired that the mission be kept secret, such was not the case. The Mexican press knew about the proposed meeting from the first, and, much to the surprise of Slidell, he found himself greeted by expressions of contempt in newspapers as well as in specially printed circulars. One paper, hostile to the present government, denounced that regime, accusing it of engaging in "horrible treason". It went on to disclose nearly the full details of his pending negotiations with the government, including his offers to purchase New Mexico and California. It urged the people of Mexico to revolt and overthrow the Herrera Regime since "a few months more and we shall have no country left at all."[2]

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[1]Slidell to Buchanan, November 30, 1845, ibid., pp. 776-777.

[2]El Amigo del Pueblo, November 1, 1845, Quoted in David M. Pletcher, The Diplomacy of Annexation (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1973), p. 354.

The Mexican government of President Herrera, aside from this public criticism, faced staggering problems. The Cabinet was badly divided on the question of how to deal with the U.S. Opinions ranged from a desire on the part of certain members to sell the provinces and be done with the problems, to that of the Minister of War, Pedro Anaya, who called for an all-out offensive war. In the end, however, most of the Cabinet agreed that without additional funds, such a war would be useless. Attempts to secure foreign loans met with no success, and the financial situation remained acute. In addition to these problems, Herrera had real cause to doubt the allegiance of the army, without which he could not possibly hope to survive. When he ordered the best of the Mexican troops north to reinforce the Texas border, their general, Mariano Paredes, refused to go, pleading lack of supplies. Constant plotting by various factions was the order of the day, and one could hardly tell from which direction the next threat to the government would come.[1] The Herrera Regime only hoped that it could survive until the first of January, when a new Congress would convene. Strong support from that group could turn the tide in its favor.

As Slidell traveled between Vera Cruz and Mexico City he met John Black at Puebla. Black had been in almost constant touch with the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs,

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[1]Ibid., p. 355.

Manuel de la Pena y Pena. Slidell and the Consul conferred and decided that Black should call on Pena as soon as they arrived in Mexico City and present Slidell's credentials to him. Accordingly, on December 8, Black had the first of two meetings with the Mexican Minister. In addition to presenting the credentials, Black enclosed a note from Slidell which asked that a date be set for his meeting with representatives of the Mexican government. Pena expressed shock at the American Minister's early arrival, stating that it was his impression that he would not arrive until after the first of the year. He had hoped that such would be the case since the Mexican government was just then in the process of communicating with the various Departments in order to obtain their opinions on how to proceed. He also spoke quite frankly about the strength of the opposition to the Herrera Regime, adding that it would be necessary for the government to proceed very cautiously, at least until after the first of the year. However, he took Slidell's credentials to examine them.

During the course of this first conversation, Pena casually asked Black who had been appointed Secretary of the Mission. When Black responded that he supposed it would be Dr. Parrott, the Mexican Minister became very agitated, and flatly proclaimed Parrott persona non grata in Mexico. Presumably this was due to the nature of the Doctor's claims against that country. He concluded the meeting by promising

a reply on December 10.[1] When that day arrived, Black received a note from Pena's secretary which stated that a reply would not be forthcoming due to the necessity of submitting the credentials to the Government Council for advice. This group was composed of leading citizens in the country, but generally reflected the views of the church.[2] On the thirteenth, Black called on the Mexican Minister at his home to inquire when an answer would be given to Slidell's request for a meeting. At this time Pena broached the subject of the title given to Slidell as Envoy Extraordinary and Ministe Plenipotentiary. He stated that he felt this was not correct since there had been a suspension of relations between the U.S. and Mexico and to receive such a Minister would imply that a resumption of diplomatic intercourse had taken place. He did not press the point at this time, but once again objected strenuously to the appointment of Parrott as Secretary. The meeting on the thirteenth closed with Pena expressing happiness at the selection of Slidell as Minister, for he had ". . . received very favorable information in relation to /him/."[3]

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[1]John Black to Slidell, December 15, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 778.

[2]Louis Martin Sears, John Slidell (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1925), p. 60.

[3]Black to Slidell, December 15, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 778.

When Black informed Slidell about the nature of his meetings with Pena, the American Minister was very disgruntled. Pena had given the Consul a note for him at their last meeting which was vague and uncertain. In Slidell's opinion the present Mexican government wished to negotiate with him, but dared not in the present climate of the Capital. He felt the decision to submit his credentials to the Advisory Council was a device by Herrera to shift responsibility for the decision to that body. But, regardless of whether that was true or not:

> This, at least, is certain, the Administration in referring a matter entirely within its own competence to a body whose decision they cannot control, and upon whose sympathies they cannot rely, manifest either a weakness or a bad faith which renders the prospect of any favorable issue to negotiations with them at best very problematical.[1]

He informed Secretary Buchanan that decisions of the Council soon became common knowledge and he had already ascertained that they advised the Administration not to receive him. He had even been made aware of the reasons they had given for their advice. These included the fact that his credentials had not been "sanctioned" by Congress; his appointment had not been confirmed by the Senate; that the only subject for talks was to be Texas, while Slidell was authorized to discuss any matters; and the aforesaid reason that his credentials named him as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary,

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[1]Slidell to Buchanan, December 17, 1845, ibid., p. 780.

while Mexico had agreed to receive only a Commissioner. Although he intended to continue the mission, he still felt that nothing could be gained by pressing this government since ". . . their existence hangs by a thread and they retain power not by their own force, but solely by the inability of their opponents to agree among themselves." In his opinion a revolution would soon occur and the U.S. would be left facing a government ". . . more hostile, but possessing greater energy." He concluded gloomily that "A refusal to treat with or even receive me at all , . . is a possible, I ought to say probable, event." In that case he intended to place the entire blame for the failure of the mission on the Mexicans.[1]

On December 20, Slidell wrote to Pena stating that his credentials were certainly in order referring to Mexican agreement to receive an Envoy "with full powers" to adjust disputes.[2] That same day, Pena's official letter arrived which advised him that the Mexican government ". . . regrets to inform him, that although the Supreme Government of the Republic is animated by pacific and conciliatory intentions . . . it does not conceive that . . . it should admit His Excellency, Mr. Slidell, in the character in which he is

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[1]Ibid., pp. 781-782.

[2]Slidell to Pena, December 20, 1845, ibid., p. 787.

invested. . . ." The intelligence that Slidell had received concerning the probable refusal to receive him and the reasons for it was quite accurate. Pena stated that the Mexican government had agreed to receive a Commissioner ad hoc, one which would deal only with the subject of Texas. If Mexico received a full Minister Plenipotentiary, reasoned the Mexican Minister, they would be admitting that diplomatic relations had been resumed ". . . which could not be the case until the questions which have led to the present interruption of those relations should have been settled in a manner peaceful, but at the same time, honourable, to Mexico." He went on to imply that the mere desire of the President of the United States to restore good relations was not enough. Pena ended by stating that the sentiments expressed to Black by the Mexican government on October 14, when they indicated they would receive a Commissione, had not changed, it would be glad to receive Slidell when he presented proper credentials.[1]

Slidell could not have been surprised at this bit of news, and in a lengthy, and at times, sarcastic letter, he replied on December 24 to Pena's note. In a point-by-point refutation of the arguments presented by the Mexican Minister, he at first compared the aggrieved feelings of Mexico

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[1]Pena to Slidell, December 20, 1845, ibid., pp. 787-789.

regarding the Texas question to the similarly bitter feelings in the U.S. over the claims issue, stating that the United States had ". . . complaints better founded, and more serious." He then recounted, in what must have been excruciating detail, the entire history of the American claims, winding up with the Mexican refusal to keep its "solemn treaty stipulations" by its refusal to pay. He, of course, defended the nature of his credentials arguing that Mexico had agreed to see a ". . . Commissioner . . . with full powers to settle the present dispute. . . ." In regard to his title, Slidell responded by stating he ". . . will not do Y(our) E(xcellency) the injustice to suppose, that any reliance is placed by Y.E. in the mere verbal distinction between the terms Envoy and Commissioner. . . ." He also pointed to instances where Pena had interchangable referred to the terms Commissioner and Plenipotentiary to give weight to his agrument that the actual title of the representative of the U.S. was irrelevant and unimportant. Slidell concluded by stating that "Mexico, rejects the olive branch which has been so frankly extended to her." and, if the present circumstances should lead to war, ". . . the sole responsibility of such a calamity, with all its consequences, must rest with the Mexican Republic."[1] In these statements, Slidell undoubtedly

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[1]Slidell to Pena, December 24, 1845, ibid., pp. 790-800.

reflected the sentiments of Polk. In his annual message to Congress that same month, the President had referred to the grave possibility of war, but stated that he was willing to await the outcome of the Slidell Mission before recommending to Congress, ". . . ulterior measures of redress for the wrongs and injuries we have borne. . . ."[1]

In his report back to Buchanan, Slidell seemed most concerned about his reply to Pena being too lenient. His refusal to reply in stronger terms he attributed to two reasons: first, it was his feeling that the Mexican refusal was dictated by fears regarding the internal situation, and secondly, he felt that the "relative situation" of the two countries, lying so close to one another, precluded the use of harsh language. He commented at length on the existing internal situation in Mexico, concluding that General Herrera would soon be replaced, most likely by another military man. Slidell was frank to admit his distrust and contempt for the people of Mexico stating "As for a people, in the proper sense of the term, it does not exist in Mexico, the masses are totally indifferent to all the revolutions that are going on, and submit with the most stupid indifference to any masters that may be imposed upon them." He sounded an ominous note in his conclusion by warning:

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[1]James D. Richardson, Ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the President, 1789-1897 (Washington: 1896-99), Volume IV, pp. 387-389.

> Of one thing, however, I feel assured, that after what has occurred, should any concession be made by our government, if any American Minister present himself here, without an unqualified retraction . . . of Mr. Pena Y Pena's note . . . he will come on a bootless errand. The desire of our government to secure peace will be mistaken for timidity, the most extravagant pretentions will be made and insisted upon, until the Mexican people shall be convinced by hostile demonstrations, that our differences must be settled promptly, either by negotiation or the sword.[1]

Two days later, Slidell met with Charles Bankhead, the British Minister to Mexico, who informed him that Pena had requested that Slidell be advised that the reason for his rejection lay in the present critical state of internal affairs. Slidell had been suspicious of British motives in Mexico, and asked Bankhead point-blank whether he had advised the Mexicans to refuse to receive him. The British Minister replied that he had given no advice on the matter to the Mexicans and certainly could not recollect expressing any opinions regarding the American Minister's reception. Slidell could scarcely believe such a statement, and expressed the belief privately that while the British might wish to prevent a war, they would doubtless prefer that U.S.-Mexican relations remain as strained as possible.[2]

Slidell had reason to be suspicious of British

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[1]Slidell to Buchanan, December 27, 1845, ibid., pp. 800-803.

[2]Slidell to Buchanan, December 29, 1845, ibid., pp. 804-805.

intentions. At that time the Oregon situation appeared to be reaching a climax, with both sides having stiffened earlier positions. So crucial was the problem in the Northwest, that the President devoted nearly his full efforts to it. Although he appeared to be ready for some type of compromise in mid-December, Polk was wary of taking any action which might be interpreted as a sign of weakness. He felt very strongly that in this matter he had the backing of the vast majority of his countrymen, and as such was determined that the British accept the American plan of compromise already offered. For a President who had been in office less than a year, Polk had faced incredible international pressure on two fonts. However, he was determined not to yield.

Awaiting word of Slidell's reception, Buchanan felt compelled to communicate to his Minister further instructions regarding the payment to Mexico of certain sums of money. In his letter, the Secretary indicated

> From the state of the public Treasury, an immediate draft upon it for six millions of dollars, might be honored without inconvenience. Should it become necessary . . . you might therefore stipulate to pay this sum in cash on the ratification of any treaty . . . the balance, if any, could be paid in four equal semi-annual installments.

In a profoundly important paragraph, which reflected the feelings of President Polk, Buchanan wrote

> I need add nothing to what I have already said, to convince you of the vast importance which the

> President attaches to the accomplishment of the one or the other of those two last alternatives (the purchase of New Mexico and California) . . . either of them would secure incalculable advantages to this country. Under these circumstances, I need scarcely again urge you to exert all honorable means to accomplish the settlement. . . . If this cannot be effected; or if after obtaining all the information in your power, you discover that the attempt to effect it would endanger your success in securing the one or the other of the first two objects mentioned in your instructions; (Texas question and American claims) then, you are not to sacrifice these in the pursuit of what is unattainable.[1]

The Mexican government undoubtedly had two major considerations in mind when making the decision to refuse to treat with Slidell. Foremost in their minds was the internal situation in which the Herrera Regime found itself. Besieged by enemies on all sides, the only hope for survival lay in maintaining what control they had until the first of the year when the new Mexican Congress would meet. To exhibit any weakness, such as a willingness to deal with the hated Americans, would have been an open invitation to rebellion by any of a number of various factions. The current problems between the United States and Great Britain over Oregon provided a second consideration. It was, at the time, widely surmised worldwide that the differences could lead to a war. If such an eventuality should occur, the Americans would undoubtedly be paying far more attention to this northern

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, December 17, 1845, ibid., pp. 184-185.

problem than the one on their southern border. Quite possibly Mexico would be free to act as she chose regarding her former province, Texas.

When Slidell received his formal rejection from the Mexican government, he decided to move his mission from the Mexican capital to Jalapa, a city approximately one hundred miles to the east. In doing so, he cited three main considerations. First and foremost, this was to be a demonstration of American firmness in the face of his rejection. He did not wish to appear as though he would be waiting around Mexico City for the government to see him at its convenience. Since Jalapa was located on the way back to Washington, this would surely be taken by the Mexicans as meaning that the Americans were perfectly willing to abide by the consequences of his refusal, and recall their minister promptly. Slidell also did not wish to be present in the midst of a revolution, which he felt sure was coming. His reasoning was that if he was far away when it came, no one could accuse the U.S. of having undermined the Herrera Regime hoping for a better reception from a new administration. Finally, being near to Vera Cruz and the American naval squadron, he believed that it would be easier for him to communicate with home, as well as receive instructions on how to proceed.

Accordingly, he requested an escort from the Mexican government to convey him to Jalapa. The Mexicans stalled for nearly three weeks before complying with his request, pleading

the instability of the internal situation and the necessity of keeping all troops in the Capital. Slidell thought the delay was due to the fact that the Mexican government wanted him near in order to negotiate with him whenever they found it possible. Finally he received an escort, but before he left, he made known to the Mexicans through a confidante that the Americans were perfectly willing to relieve their financial embarrassment for some small considerations.[1]

In the middle of December, the long-awaited revolution against Herrera began. As most had assumed, the most powerful of the military chiefs, Mariano Y Arillaga Paredes was the instigator. He issued a "revolutionary pronunciamento" on December 14, which detailed the reasons for his complete lack of confidence in the Herrera Regime. Among the complaints alleged were, the fact that it had tried to avoid a just and honorable war with the U.S., and the fact that it had allowed a commissioner to come into the country from the United States. He further stated that the army was declaring all subsequent acts of the executive authorities and the present Congress null and void. They were both to cease functioning and prepare for the army to occupy the Capital. Paredes also intended to provide the country with a new constitution.[2] Although the Herrera Administration tried

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[1]Pletcher, op. cit., p. 361.

[2]Rives, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

valiantly to resist this takeover, it soon found that the entire army was behind the move and resistance would be impossible. Paredes waited until he was certain that there would be no armed resistance, and then entered the Capital in a trumphant march on January 2, 1846. The foregoing series of events shocked Slidell, who remarked in a letter to Buchanan,

> When it is recollected that the civil authorities throughout the country . . . were opposed to the movement of Paredes . . . that both branches of Congress had unanimously declared their abhorence of his treachery . . . not a shot has been fired in defence of the constitutional government, and you may form some idea of the utter imbecility of the people, and of the uncontrolled supremacy exercised by the army in this miscalled Republic.[1]

When Slidell's rejection became known in Washington, Polk decided to take firm action. He ordered General Zachary Taylor, with the Army of Texas, to proceed South and occupy the left bank of the Rio Grande River. Although this territory was disputed between the U.S. and Mexico, he reasoned that such strong action would underscore American determination not to give in. He further ordered a fleet assembled in the Gulf of Mexico where it would be prepared to move quickly in the event that hostilities should suddenly break out. Secretary Buchanan hinted at the possibility of stern American measures when he informed Slidell, "Should the Mexican

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[1]Slidell to Buchanan, January 14, 1846, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 808-809.

government, by finally refusing to receive you, consumate the act of folly and bad faith of which they have afforded such strong indications, nothing will then remain for this government but to take the redress of the wrongs of its citizens into its own hands."[1] The Secretary went on to compliment Slidell on his handling of the situation, in particular his attempts to put the entire blame for his lack of success on the Mexican government. He informed his emissary that the claims question and the problems of Texas could never be separated despite Mexican insistence. He concluded his letter by stating "The desire of the President is that you should conduct yourself with such wisdom and firmness in the crisis, that the voice of the American people shall be unanimous in favor of redressing the wrongs of our much injured and long suffering claimants."[2]

Shortly after he wrote this dispatch, Buchanan received two further notes from Slidell detailing his official refusal by the Mexicans and the recent revolution. The Secretary was prompt in giving his Envoy new instructions on how to proceed. He informed Slidell that after a careful examination of the events which had taken place, the President ". . . entirely approves your conduct." While the President was

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, January 20, 1846, ibid., p. 186.

[2]Ibid.

"sincerely desirous to preserve peace with Mexico. . . . Should /they/ finally refuse to receive you, the cup of forbearance will then have been exhausted. Nothing can remain but to take the redress of the injuries to our citizens and the insults to our government into our own hands." Buchanan cautioned that "In view of the serious alternative, every honorable effort should be made before a rupture." But, if Slidell discovered that the Mexicans were "trifling with this government" he should demand his passports and leave the country. The Secretary ended the dispatch by taking issue with Slidell over his statement that he felt it necessary for the Mexican government to retract the Pena note of December 21, 1845, before any talks proceeded. Buchanan stated "This might be a necessary preliminary, if there had been no change of government." But in view of the fact that there was a new Administration, ". . . such a retraction, however desirable, ought not to interpose an insuperable obstacle to negotiation."[1]

During February the President decided to take further aggressive steps. In a Cabinet meeting on the seventeenth of that month, Polk suggested that Slidell ". . . demand an early decision of the Mexican government, whether they would receive him or not." If it refused, the American Envoy would

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, January 28, 1846, ibid., pp. 187-189.

be ordered to a warship on the Gulf of Mexico and the President would seek authorization from Congress to deliver an ultimatum to the Mexican government concerning a prompt settlement of matters in dispute. If the Mexicans refused this ultimatum, then the government could ". . . take redress into our own hands by aggressive measures."[1] The entire Cabinet approved this idea with the exception of Buchanan, who argued that such a plan would cause the United States to make a quick choice between peace and war. In addition, waiting until Slidell returned would give further time for deliberations and Congress would probably be more cooperative. After the Envoy's return, a naval officer could present American demands, and if Mexico chose to cooperate, Slidell could return to that country.[2] Polk took the matter under advisement and two days later, informed his Secretary of State that he would wait. Several reasons caused the President to act as he did. First, the extreme financial embarrassment of the Mexicans could force them into negotiations. Secondly, if Slidell's description of the political climate in Mexico was true, further revolutions could occur at any time and bring to power a government willing to deal with her northern neighbor. Third, George Bancroft,

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[1]Quaife, op. cit., pp. 233-234.

[2]Pletcher, op. cit., pp. 367-368.

Secretary of War, was advised by a knowledgeable friend that Paredes was disguising his true feelings toward the U.S. and really wanted to negotiate. Finally, the Oregon question was stirring up increasingly hostile feelings between the Americans and the British, and it would not be wise to have two heating pots coming to a boil at the same time.[1]

When Slidell received his additional instructions from Buchanan, he lost no time in contacting the new Mexican Foreign Minister, Castillo Y Lanzas. In a letter written on March 1, 1846, the American Envoy traced the history of his unsuccessful mission to that date, and informed the Mexicans that his government entirely approved of his actions in the case. He stated that had it not been for the revolution taking place and a new government coming to power, he would have demanded his passports and left the country. But, since the change of Administrations in Mexico, "The President is unwilling to take a course which would inevitably result in war, without making another effort to avert so great a calamity. He wishes to demonstrate to the civilized world, that if peace shall be disturbed, the responsibility must fall on Mexico alone." He then concluded by requesting that a decision on whether or not he would be received be reached with as little delay as possible.[2] Slidell gave the letter

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[1]Ibid., p. 368.

[2]Slidell to Lanzas, March 1, 1846, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 814-815.

to Black to deliver, and instructed him to inform the Mexicans that if he did not receive a reply by the fifteenth of the month, he would demand his passports and leave.

Slidell had some reasons to believe that this attempt to negotiate with the Mexicans would be successful. All their attempts to secure foreign loans had failed and the financial situation was becoming more acute with each passing day. Also, many Mexicans suspected that some foreign government would attempt to place a monarch in control of the country, and Mexico would revert back to its former colonial state. These fears tended to occupy the people's minds and lessen their clamor against the United States. And finally, General Almonte, who had occupied the post of Minister of War, had resigned quite suddenly. Since he was known to be a Yankee-hater, his absence from the Cabinet could quite possibly mean that there would be a change of heart. Slidell reasoned, "I have considered his presence in the Cabinet as offering an almost insuperable obstacle to any amicable adjustment of our differences /hence/ his retirement at this juncture is a good omen."[1]

Slidell's optimism proved to be unfounded. Lanzas submitted the question once again in the Council of Government, whose makeup, but not its philosophy, had changed. That body

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[1]Slidell to Buchanan, March 1, 1846, ibid., pp. 815-817.

quickly considered the question, and determined that the earlier opinion which had been rendered, still stood. They pointed out that menacing troop movements and warships on the Gulf offered proof that the Americans were acting in bad faith. Lanzas also sought foreign advice on the problem, going initially to Bermudez de Castro, the Spanish Minister. He advised against receiving Slidell since the Americans were, in his opinion, just searching for an excuse for war. Both Lanzas and Paredes consulted the British Minister Bankhead who suggested caution and urged the Mexicans to do nothing which might provoke their adversary. He advised the Mexicans to seek some alternative arrangements regarding Slidell and his credentials. That way they would learn whether the American Envoy possessed flexible instructions and also gain time.[1]

The Mexican government chose to ignore the British advice, and, in a lengthy letter to Slidell on March 12, Lanzas informed him that ". . . the Mexican government cannot receive him as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary." The Mexican Minister defended this action on several grounds. First the Americans had been making threatening moves and no self-respecting government could negotiate under such circumstances. The Americans had also

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[1]Pletcher, op. cit., p. 370.

manifested a "vehement desire" to despoil Mexico of her territory. There was, of course, the entire question of Texas which had outraged the whole country. Finally, by sending a full Minister Plenipotentiary, when Mexico had clearly agreed to treat with only a Commissioner, the United States had committed an act ". . . which the undersigned does not permit himself to qualify." He ended by stating that Mexico ". . . has offered herself and will continue to offer herself, open to all honorable means of conciliation. . . . If war should finally become inevitable . . . the responsibility will not fall upon Mexico, it will all rest upon the United States."[1]

When Slidell received this letter from Lanzas, he concluded that further hope for the success of his mission was futile. In a dispatch to the Mexican Minister he traced the history of the dispute. Slidell noted that the U.S. had never encouraged immigration to Texas, that the U.S. had at first refused to annex that territory, and further since the Mexican government could not hope to ever again exercise any authority over it, they had no right to attempt to control its destiny. He further asserted that his presence in the country, a full-fledged Minister, empowered to discuss all matters, was proof of good faith on the part of the United

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[1]Lanzas to Slidell, March 12, 1846, DCUS, op. cit., pp. 818-823.

States.[1] In a letter home to Buchanan the next day, Slidell informed him of his decision to demand his passports, and upon receiving them, would proceed to Vera Cruz, and from there to New Orleans. He stated that it was his belief that the Mexicans had refused him on two grounds, the first being that since Herrera had refused to accept him, no subsequent administration could do so without appearing cowardly. The other reason he felt was a reliance on foreign aid. The American Envoy remained suspicious of British motives stating that he believed Bankhead ". . . has interferred (sic) with the question of my reception in no friendly spirit." He concluded with the dire prediction that ". . . we shall never be able to treat /with Mexico/ until she has been taught to respect us. . . ."[2] He repeated this view in somewhat harsher tones in an additional dispatch to Buchanan that same day, "Depend on it, we can never get along well with them until we have given them a good drubbing."[3]

Although Lanzas delayed complying with the American Envoy's request for nearly two weeks, he finally relented and in a short note stated that since Slidell had repeated only ". . . historic arguments . . . which have been successfully

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[1]Slidell to Lanzas, March 17, 1846, ibid., pp. 824-828.

[2]Slidell to Buchanan, March 18, 1846, ibid., pp. 828-831.

[3]Slidell to Buchanan, March 18, 1846, ibid., p. 832.

refuted by the Mexican government . . ." he would not bother himself with commenting.[1] Upon receiving the passport, Slidell left immediately for Vera Cruz. When he arrived there he was presented with a lengthy and somewhat surprising dispatch from Buchanan. In a letter dated March 12, the Secretary instructed his emissary not to leave Mexico until he had made at least one formal demand to be received, and that the President wanted him to return to Mexico City to make it, since it was possible that ". . . your presence there might be productive of the most beneficial consequences." He further instructed Slidell to emphasize to the Mexicans, American willingness to relieve the financial embarrassment by the immediate payment of large sums of cash. The time for departure from Mexico was to be left up to Slidell since ". . . it is impossible for those at a distance to decide as correctly what ought to be your course in this particular as you can yourself on the spot." However, Buchanan related that "The Oregon question is rapidly approaching a crisis" and while prospects for peace with Great Britain seemed good, "Your return to the United States before the result is known would produce considerable alarm in the public mind and might possibly exercise an injurious influence on our relations with Great Britain." The Secretary closed by stating "Much must necessarily be left to the discretion of the Envoy who, on

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[1]Lanzas to Slidell, March 21, 1846, ibid., p. 834.

the spot, can take advantage of circumstances as they may arise; and the President is happy in believing that you possess all the qualifications necessary for the crisis."[1] Polk at this time appeared to be a man entirely mindful of the dual crisis his policies had engendered and was thus attempting to exercise some caution.

Slidell appeared to be flabbergasted at receiving these belated instructions. In a reply to Buchanan from on board the warship Mississippi which was conveying him to New Orleans, he stated his regret at not receiving the dispatch earlier, for if this had been the case, "I should have endeavored to find some plausible motive for prolonging my sojourn. . . ." In regard to the President's request that he return to Mexico City, Slidell indicated that he was confident that ". . . my return there could have exercised no favorable influence on the question of my reception? and that to have done so ". . . would have been inconsistent with the national honor."[2]

As Slidell left for New Orleans, the situation in Mexico continued to deteriorate. Paredes, who by organizing a military revolution had hoped to bring stability to the country, found just the opposite had occurred. Ironically he

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, March 12, 1846, ibid., pp. 189-192.

[2]Slidell to Buchanan, April 2, 1846, ibid., p. 837.

found himself denounced by opposition and the public for not dealing decisively with the Americans much as he himself had denounced Herrera. When he attempted to move an army to the north to counter Taylor's move to the Rio Grande, a mutiny broke out among the soldiers and it was some time before this could be put down. Rumors that he favored a monarchist plot to place a foreign prince in control of Mexico abounded, and when forced to issue a manifesto to the contrary, his finance minister resigned under protest. His manifesto stated that the administration would not recognize the American claim to Texas, but neither would it take decisive action there. This led to outright charges of cowardice. Finally the Minister of War, Juan Almonte resigned and began organizing a movement against the government. When Paredes became suspicious, he sent Almonte on a diplomatic mission to France in order to get him out of the country. Almonte only pretended to leave, however, and after starting mild insurrections against the Administration in the southern part of the country, he proceeded to go to Cuba and join forces with the exiled leader, Santa Anna.[1]

As the situation headed toward a climax, General Taylor reached the Rio Grande and set up camp near the present site of Brownsville, Texas. He tried to reassure the native population there that his intentions were peaceful, and that

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[1]Pletcher, op. cit., pp. 372-373.

he and his troops needed to purchase supplies and would pay the highest market price for them. Since Polk had authorized him to proceed as far into the disputed territory as Matamoros, Taylor and his army then moved south toward that city. Aware that this action would probably be interpreted as threatening, he sent his second-in-command to contact the Mexican commander at Matamoros and assure him that the Americans had no warlike motives. He also proposed a joint occupation of the border until negotiations between the two countries had been completed. The Mexicans, however, refused to be convinced so easily, and Taylor soon realized that they were making preparations for war. He, in turn, began construction of a fort in order to be prepared for any eventuality.[1]

On April 17, President Polk wrote to Slidell who had stopped in New Orleans, urging him to proceed at once to Washington where he could supply needed information on the current Mexican situation. He assured his Envoy that he would take no action until his arrival. Although the President was anxious to resolve matters, sound reasons existed for him to delay. All dispatches from Mexico, including Slidell's, indicated a growing dissatisfaction with the Paredes Regime, and only time could tell whether that Administration would survive. If it did not, a new government might be willing to

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[1]Ibid., pp. 374-375.

accept American terms. Also, the Oregon question now occupied the forefront, and, while it appeared that crisis could be settled peacefully, it would be best to wait before initiation of any action in another area. Finally, leading members of Congress, such as John C. Calhoun and Thomas Benton, advised him to delay until after Oregon was settled. In a cabinet meeting on April 25, the President stated that ". . . we must take redress for the injuries done us unto our own hands, that we have attempted to conciliate Mexico in vain, and had forborne until forbearance was no longer either a virtue or patriotic . . . and . . . we should take a bold and firm course toward Mexico." However, he expressed a willingness to wait until Slidell's arrival before taking any decisive action. He did intend, nevertheless, to take the matter to Congress before that body adjourned for the summer.[1]

On May 8, Slidell arrived in Washington and Buchanan accompanied him to the White House. The Secretary of State stayed for only a short time, and when he left, Polk and Slidell conversed for an hour about the Envoy's mission. Slidell recommended to the President that he take stern measures with "promptness and energy." Polk informed him that he would send a message to Congress, probably as early as the next week.[2] The following day, in a Cabinet meeting, the President stated his belief that already there existed

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[1]Ibid., p. 382.

[2]Ibid., p. 384.

ample cause for war, and that he should send a message to Congress recommending "definitive measures" by the following Tuesday. The members of the Cabinet unanimously agreed if the Mexicans attacked Taylor, they should send Congress an immediate war message. Differences of opinion existed on whether to recommend war on the basis of what had already taken place. Buchanan and most members sided with the President in the affirmative, but Secretary Bancroft replied in the negative.[1] The meeting broke up without reaching agreement on the question, and Polk asked the members to return Tuesday to help him draft his message to Congress. Later that day, Polk received word that on April 25, the Mexicans had attacked a small body of his soldiers who were on reconnaisance, whereupon the President reconvened the Cabinet that night. This time there was no objection to a war message.

In his war message to Congress, delivered on Monday, May 11, Polk traced the long history of American grievances against Mexico stressing the "liberal and honorable" terms which the United States had offered her and the "fair and equitable" principles on which this country operated. In speaking of the mission of John Slidell, the President stated his firm belief that the Herrera Administration would have ultimately received the American minister had it not been

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[1]Quaife, op. cit., pp. 353-354.

overthrown by a military revolution. The Paredes Regime had rejected Slidell ". . . in terms that may be considered as giving just grounds of offense to . . . the United States. In doing so, it had ". . . violated [its] plighted faith. . ." for they had agreed to receive an American representative. The message also dealt at length with the unpaid claims which were owed to Americans, but the greatest offense Polk saved for last. The Mexicans had now ". . . invaded our territory and shed American blood on the American soil. . . . War exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself." In concluding his message, the President asked Congress to recognize that a state of war existed between the two countries, and that the administration be given authority to make appropriations and raise a volunteer force.[1] Congress, after some debate in both houses, extended its approval. War had come to the "Sister Republics."

The key point in analyzing the mission of John Slidell has always regarded President Polk's intentions in the matter. Did he intend for the mission to be a failure from the beginning, thereby creating a war in which his territorial ambitions could be realized? While this viewpoint seems to be gaining an increasing number of proponents, it is one with little basis in fact and powerful arguments in opposition.

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[1]Henry Steele Commager, Documents of American History (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), pp. 310-311.

However, once it is established that Polk sincerely wanted the mission to succeed, a further point remains. Did the bargaining position which he set forth permit a negotiated settlement with the Mexicans on any basis other than a complete American victory? It appears that this question must be answered in the negative, and it is this last point which casts the responsibility for the failure of the mission squarely on the shoulders of the President.

Polk sent an emissary, John Slidell, to Mexico in the fall of 1845 with instructions to accomplish several goals. He wanted to bring the long smouldering question of American claims on Mexico to a conclusion as quickly as possible. He also desired to erect a permanent boundary between Texas and her southern neighbor, preferably one that would give the U.S. claim to the wide expanse of territory down to the Rio Grande River. He further hoped to add valuable territorial acquisitions to the country by purchasing New Mexico and whatever part of California territory he could persuade the Mexicans to part with. A careful examination of the facts surrounding the mission would lead one to the conclusion that Polk must be absolved of charges that he deliberately provoked a war with Mexico.

In order to establish clearly the foregoing conclusion, one must scrutinize closely several facets of the mission, beginning with the selection of John Slidell to be the Envoy sent to Mexico. In naming the Louisiana Congressman, Polk

chose someone whom he admittedly ". . . had very little personal acquaintance with . . ." having done so solely ". . . on Mr. Buchanan's recommendation."[1] Neither he, nor any other cabinet member who was present at the time of the selection, ever mentioned any other person being considered. Other persons actively sought the post, in particular Senator Ambrose Sevier of Arkansas, with whom the President was very familiar. Nor can it be said that Polk had the appointment forced upon him by his Secretary of State, for Polk had recently rejected Buchanan's choice for the Supreme Court, which caused some hard feelings between them. It seems clear, then, that Slidell was chosen solely on the basis of his friendship with Buchanan and his qualifications for the job. These included an interest in Mexican affairs, as well as a fluency in the Spanish language. If Polk designed the mission from the beginning to be a failure, or if he intended somehow to deceive the Mexicans, why would he entrust so delicate a task to an unknown quantity such as Slidell? It would seem much more likely that he would have selected a crony of his, of whom there were several in the Washington area alone. A person with whom he was on intimate terms could be expected to keep any clandestine secrets to himself, in respect to the President's wishes. In addition to this, the President chose not to have a pre-mission conference with

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[1]Quaife, op. cit., p. 232.

his envoy, but instead communicated with him entirely by mail. This was done despite the fact that time existed for such a conference while Consul John Black was obtaining official assurances from Mexico regarding the mission. If Polk had secret instructions for his envoy, he would most certainly have communicated those to him orally rather than by post. If Polk intended the mission to fail, it seems clear that his envoy was not aware of it.

Another point which must be made is that much was left to the discretion of the envoy himself, once he was present in Mexico. On several occasions highly sensitive decisions were left up to Slidell. In the lengthy instructions which he received at the outset of the mission, Secretary Buchanan stated, "The views and wishes of the President are before you, and much at last must be left to your own discretion."[1] In a later dispatch, Buchanan, after authorizing Slidell to pay large sums of money and again impressing him with the importance of the mission, concluded, "All is confided to your judgment and discretion."[2] Polk even left the question of when to declare the mission a failure and return home up to the envoy, as Buchanan informed him that "In regard to the time of your departure from the Mexican

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, November 10, 1845, DCUS, op. cit., p. 181.

[2]Buchanan to Slidell, December 17, 1845, ibid., p. 184.

Republic, the President is willing to extend your discretion."[1] It seems likely that had Polk not intended the mission to be successful, he would not have allowed an unknown envoy such freedom of action. He would most assuredly have given specific instructions to Slidell, so that his wishes, and his alone, would be carried out.

Further proof that Polk desired for the mission to succeed comes after Slidell's first rejection by the Herrera Regime. The President resolved not to let this rebuff abort the mission, but instead instructed his envoy that in view of the serious consequences which could result, he should make ". . . every honorable effort . . ." to negotiate and should ". . . wait patiently for a final decision on the question of your reception."[2] Later, Slidell was advised to remain in Mexico if ". . . you should indulge a reasonable hope, that by continuing in Mexico you could thus best subserve the interests of your country."[3] Also, the fact that Polk ordered Slidell to return to Mexico City from Jalapa when he made his second request to be received, must be considered. In giving this order, Polk reasoned that Slidell would be closer to the Mexican government, and that this would be

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, March 12, 1846, ibid., p. 191.

[2]Buchanan to Slidell, January 28, 1846, ibid., p. 187.

[3]Buchanan to Slidell, March 12, 1846, ibid., p. 191.

viewed as a sign that the U.S. was resolved to make every effort to bring about negotiations. Polk also felt that he would be better able to make known his government's willingness to relieve Mexican financial embarrassment.

Two further extracts from the instructions provide additional proof of Polk's intentions. At one point Slidell requested that he be informed as to what course to take if, in the discussion of claims, the Mexicans themselves presented a list of claims that they had on the United States. Since none were known to exist, this must have presented a slight problem. However, it was one that could have been dealt with very easily by simply instructing the envoy to reject any such notion, since the claims commission had not recognized any. Instead, Polk extended Slidell ". . . full power embracing authority to treat all claims of the government and citizens of Mexico against the United States. . . ." Secretary Buchanan told the envoy that "Should any be presented in the course of your negotiations, whether arising from Commodore Jones occupation of Monterey or any other cause, you will not fail to give them a careful and thorough examination."[1] This would seem to indicate a willingness on the part of the President to appear reasonable if negotiations were begun.

Another factor which must be taken into consideration,

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[1]Buchanan to Slidell, January 28, 1846, ibid., p. 188.

regards Slidell's contention that Pena's note of December 21 be retracted before negotiations began. Had the Polk administration been searching for ways of assuring the mission's failure, they would have needed only to approve this course for their emissary or, at least, keep silent about it. Certainly no Mexican government, or any self-respecting country, would dare retract such a statement as a condition for negotiation. Instead of this, Polk overruled Slidell by telling him that such a retraction would not be necessary as a prelude to his reception. He was instructed to proceed as if the note had never been written. It seems clear from this that the President desired to remove obstacles which might be in the way of the success of the mission.

The large amounts which were offered for various portions of Mexican territory offer further proof of Polk's sincerity. Buchanan told Slidell initially that he could offer twenty-five million dollars plus assume the unpaid claims against Mexico, if he could successfully negotiate a treaty which would settle the boundary of Texas and include California and New Mexico. In a subsequent letter to Slidell, Polk intimated that he could go even higher than those figures if he felt it necessary to secure the desired boundaries. When it is remembered that at the time Mexico was thoroughly destitute and had little or no prospects for changing that condition, one can realize that such sums of money would be sorely tempting. In addition, Mexico would

not be parting with any area which she either controlled or considered vital to her survival. Polk and many other observors certainly felt that Mexico, in her condition, would not be able to pass up such sums. In view of these circumstances, Slidell was twice instructed to let U.S. willingness to relieve Mexican financial troubles be known. As one can never be certain to what lengths a starving man will go to obtain food, neither could one make any assumptions regarding what a financially pressed country would do to obtain funds.

One other factor which must be brought out concerning the payment of money to Mexico, is Polk's desire to create for Slidell a one-million dollar contingency fund. The envoy could use this at his discretion to obtain a favorable settlement. Polk reasoned that since Mexico was in such dire financial straits, the army might soon discontinue support for General Paredes unless money could be obtained within a short time. If Slidell had in his possession funds with which to make an immediate payment, the odds for success would be enhanced. As Polk himself stated "Indeed I thought that the prompt payment of such a sum might induce /Paredes/ to make a treaty which he would not otherwise venture to make."[1] The Cabinet agreed with this view, but some, including Buchanan, were skeptical as to whether such a fund could be obtained from Congress without jeopardizing the

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[1]Quaife, op. cit., pp. 306-307.

secrecy of its intent. The President believed that such an appropriation could be passed through both houses of Congress, and cited an act passed in 1806 during the Jefferson administration which created a similar fund of two million dollars. Polk decided to sound out members of Congress as to their willingness to support such legislation. Although the fund never materialized, the fact that Polk was willing to go to such lengths to obtain one, would seem to furnish ample evidence of his desire to purchase, rather than conquer, desired territories from Mexico.

Although the foregoing offers some proof of Polk's sincere desire for the mission to succeed, there remains the question concerning his terms for negotiation. Did they permit any settlement at all on terms other than a complete American victory? The answer to this question is, unfortunately, no. While it might appear from the viewpoint of Polk and the American side that the proffered terms were reasonable, to the Mexicans they most assuredly were not. A careful examination reveals that circumstances had placed the Mexican government in a nearly untenable position. The only means by which they could have extracted themselves was an American President who was sensitive to their problems, and who would extend to them some type of settlement which would allow them to regain lost prestige. Polk was most certainly not that man.

An investigation of the conditions Polk set forth for

negotiations leads one to the conclusion that the Mexicans had good reason to reject them all. First, to receive Slidell, would have meant that a resumption of diplomatic relations had taken place. The Mexicans, of course, considered themselves to be the injured party in the matter regarding Texas annexation. Since they had broken off relations with the U.S., they could not reasonably be expected to resume them without some concession. Polk was unwilling to concede anything. He believed that a strong U.S. stand would force a resumption of relations without the U.S. having to concede anything.

Polk's terms for a settlement offered no hope of successful negotiations taking place. He instructed Slidell to consider the annexation of Texas to be an accomplished fact and to press for the most extravagant boundary claim. If the Mexicans agreed to this, the United States government would assume the claims of American citizens amounting to roughly two million dollars. In other words, Mexico was to concede a large portion of what she could rightfully call her own territory in exchange for U.S. assumption of claims which she had disputed from the beginning. Clearly this was not something which the Mexicans could logically agree to.

Polk further instructed Slidell to purchase whatever portions of New Mexico and California he could persuade the Mexicans to sell. For these he was to offer large sums of money. Acquisition of California especially, had been a goal

of Polk's from the beginning of his administration.[1] He reasoned that, due to the chaotic conditions which existed in these two regions, Mexico could easily be persuaded to part with them. This would be especially true if an offer to relieve them of their acute financial embarrassment was made. Polk quite obviously erred in these assumptions. While it might be true that Mexico had a tenuous hold on California and New Mexico, it still considered them to be parts of their country. To allow themselves to part with the northern one-third of their country and gain only monetary rewards would be a national disgrace which no administration, regardless of its position, could consider.

Finally, Polk entertained little or no regard for the Mexican people themselves. Although he distrusted the British intensely and maintained a strong stance in all relations with them, there is ample evidence that he also had a healthy respect for them. During his entire dealings with Mexico, no similar respect manifests itself. While he was cautious in his public statements, he still referred at times to "a system of outrage and distortion" and a "subverted government." Statements such as these and others like them are indicative of the low esteem in which he held the nation's

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[1]Polk revealed this in a conversation with George Bancroft. See Sellers, op. cit., p. 213.

southern neighbor.[1] Clearly Polk believed that what no American or British people would countenance for a moment, the Mexicans could be persuaded to accept.

In summary, it must be concluded that a careful examination of all circumstances surrounding the John Slidell Mission to Mexico, reveals that President Polk (1) sincerely desired a negotiated settlement of the dispute regarding the annexation of Texas and the American claims; (2) genuinely desired to secure a boundary with Mexico that would give New Mexico and a large portion of California to the United States; (3) offered terms to Mexico which precluded the possibility of any settlement; (4) was prepared at all times to back up his peaceful overtures with the threat of military force, and to use this force if necessary. One can reach the additional conclusion that had the mission of John Slidell successfully completed its objectives, the Mexican War in all probability, would never have been fought. However, the chances for this were for all practical purposes, non-existent.

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[1]Pletcher, op. cit., p. 599.

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